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Wide-Awake George, the Boy Pioneer.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.



THE GUN CRACKED, AND THE CAP FLEW OUT OF THE CROTCH, AND FELL ON THE BOY'S BACK.

Wide-Awake George,

THE BOY PIONEER;

OR,

LIFE IN A LOG CABIN.

Incidents and Adventures in the Backwoods.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.

CHAPTER I.

WELCOMING A NEW SETTLER.

"THIS is my first act of ownership!"

As George Denston spoke he struck his ax into a tall young white oak tree.

Near him stood his mother, with his sister Lucy, a fine girl of sixteen. A little nearer was his brother Ben, a bright boy of fourteen. George himself was a tall and manly young fellow of eighteen.

He had become the head of the family, and felt himself equal to his responsibilities.

After the death of his father the farm in Indiana had been sold under a mortgage, and George, who had taken the direction of affairs, advised a move to South-western Arkansas, where he had traveled, and where a friend of his had offered him a section of land at a low price and on easy terms. The offer had been accepted, and the move had been made.

After a long and tiresome journey the Denston family had reached their destination, and were camped in a tent, waiting until George could put up a log house for them to live in.

It was then early spring, and the air was mild and moist.

As George struck his ax into the white oak, which he had marked as one of the logs for his cabin, he saw a man coming toward him through the forest.

This man was tall and lean, and was dressed in a ragged suit of butternut jeans. His dark face had never been touched by a razor, and his hair looked as if it had never made the acquaintance of a comb. He wore a coonskin cap on his head, and carried a long squirrel rifle, with powder-horn and bullet-pouch.

George greeted him politely, but he took no notice of the salutation.

"Wot are you cuttin' my timmer fur, young feller?" he asked.

"Cutting your timber?" replied George. "What do you mean?"

"Wot do *you* mean by comin' into my land and cuttin' my timber? That's what I want to know."

"This is my land, or my mother's, and I am sure that I am inside of my lines."

"Tain't your land at all. It's my land. I've lived on this tract goin' on fifteen year, and naterally it belongs to me."

"My mother bought the tract of Abe Lassiter," remarked George.

"Don't care 'f she did. I lived here afore Abe Lassiter kem into the kentry, and I know wot's my own."

"You had better go and speak to Lassiter

about it, then. If you can show a better title than I can, I will give up the tract. Until then I mean to hold it."

"You had better look out, young feller. I've gi'n you fa'r warnin', and all you've got to do is to git off the land. If you don't, it'll be wuss fur you."

Without another word the man turned and walked away.

"This is a queer style of welcoming a new settler," concluded George.

His mother asked him what it meant; but he could only treat the question as a conundrum, and give it up.

"I will ride over to Lassiter's and ask him about it," he declared.

He saddled his horse immediately, and rode to his nearest neighbor's—unless the claimant who had just left him was nearer.

Abe Lassiter was away from home, and his wife, an intrepid woman with a will of her own, laughed when George told her of the man who had claimed his land.

"It is Joe Scur," she said, "and he tells the truth when he says that he lived here before we came. My husband found him squatted on a corner of your section when we bought the land, and has never molested him. I suppose he thinks that because he has lived there so long he owns the tract, though he has not cleared an acre, and has never cut any timber except for firewood. Of course his claim don't amount to anything."

"But what shall I do about it?" asked George.

"Just nothing at all. Go ahead and cut your logs, and put your house up as soon as you can. When Abe comes home I will send him over to Joe Scur's to give him a talking to."

George followed Mrs. Lassiter's advice; but he thought it best to take his rifle when he went to work, as he believed that Joe Scur meant to insist upon his claim, whether he really believed in it or not.

The trees fell rapidly under the keen ax wielded by his strong young arms, and Ben assisted him in cutting them into the lengths he required for his log house.

On the afternoon of the second day of this work, as he was standing on a log and squaring off the butt, he heard the crack of a rifle close by, and felt a sharp sting in his left side.

At once he guessed the meaning of this attack, and knew that he had been hit, though he did not believe that he was badly wounded.

"Take to a tree, Ben!" he shouted, and ran to the oak against which he had leaned his rifle.

He had not been so badly startled as to fail to notice the point from which the shot was fired, and he prepared for action immediately.

The tree behind which he was concealed forked at about the height of his head from the ground. He cocked his rifle, set his cap in the fork, and watched for the next move of his adversary.

A gun, an arm, a shoulder and a head stole from behind the tree which he was watching. The gun cracked, and the cap flew out of the crotch, and fell on the boy's back.

Almost at the same instant he fired, and with telling effect.

The gun dropped from the hand of the man who had fired at him, and George ran to the tree, followed by Ben.

Behind the tree was Joe Scurl, holding with his left hand his right arm, from which blood was flowing freely. As he saw George coming toward him, he attempted to draw a knife from his belt.

"You needn't do that," said George. "I don't want to hurt you, and you can't hurt me now."

"I reckon you've broke my arm, young feller," quietly remarked Scurl.

"I hope not. Let me look at it."

George cut open the man's sleeve, and saw that his bullet had gone through the fleshy part of his arm, but without touching a bone. He tied up the wound with his handkerchief; but Scurl had lost so much blood that he was quite weak.

"Run to the tent and tell mother, Ben," ordered George. "I am going to take this man home."

"Ain't you hurt, yourself?" asked Ben.

"I've got a graze, but it don't bother me. He didn't miss me much."

"I aimed well, but you was a-choppin'," said Scurl, in the most matter-of-fact way, as if he had been shooting at a mark.

"Well, a miss is as good as a mile, I suppose; but I don't want you to practice on me any more. Come along now."

George escorted Joe Scurl to his cabin, a wretched affair that scarcely kept the rain out, and there he found Mrs. Scurl, a big-boned, yellow-faced woman, and several bare-legged boys and girls.

In answer to the woman's inquiries he briefly informed her how her husband had gone out to shear a wolf, and had been shorn.

"I allers told Joe that he was a durned fool," she averred. "He won't believe me, and I reckon it'll take a heap o' hard knocks to drive any sense inter his head. I'm surprised, though, mister, that he didn't lay you out, 'cause he's an amazin' good shot, and that's all on airth he's good fur."

Mrs. Scurl dressed her husband's wound, with the assistance of George, and looked at him with an expression of intense disgust.

"Durned ef I wouldn't like to frail him!" she exclaimed. "I'm keen to bet it'll be a solid month afore he's able to hold a rifle ag'inst that shoulder, and I'd like to know wot this yer fambly is gwine to do fur meat while he's a-gittin' well."

"I will see that you don't starve," said George. "There need not be any trouble between your husband and me. All he wants is room to hunt and a place to live, and he can stay here as long as he wants to. But I mean to have it squarely understood that my mother has bought this section of land, and owns it, and means to keep it."

George went home and had his own wound dressed. As he had said, it was only a graze; but it showed how closely he had escaped death, as Scurl had aimed well for his heart.

Abe Lassiter came by when this operation was finished, on his way to Joe Scurl's cabin, to give that squatter the "talking to" that his wife had promised.

George said that it would not be worth while to do that, as he did not believe Joe would bother him again, and he related the adventure to his friend.

"I reckon you can take care of yourself, my son," said Lassiter, "and it is lucky for you that you can. A new-comer always has to fight his way in this country, as there are plenty of bullies and rascals who are ready to pick at him. But when they find out that he has got grit into him they leave him alone."

"Do they leave you alone?" asked George.

"Pretty near always. Those who know me don't meddle with me any to hurt."

As Abe Lassiter was a tall and muscular man, who had the reputation of a dare-devil, and was known to be a dead shot, this statement might be easily believed.

George Denston congratulated himself on having passed through his first trial so safely, and the upshot of the difficulty was that he found a firm friend in Joe Scurl. Not only did the squatter cease to molest the young settler, but he seemed to entertain a real admiration and a genuine affection for him.

CHAPTER II.

HUNTING A HORSE-THIEF.

GEORGE DENSTON soon had a new illustration of the truth of Abe Lassiter's saying that in that country a new-comer had to fight his way.

He had put up his house, which was only a rude log cabin with one large room and a loft; but it was a comfortable abode for all that. All the neighborhood—if that could be called a neighborhood, where the homes of the settlers were miles apart—had come to the "raising," and he had made many acquaintances. The building had been roofed with shingles—or "boards," as they were called there—which he had riven from a large oak; a "stick and clay" chimney had been attached to one end, and the house had been floored with unseasoned plank from a distant saw-mill. To reach this result he had worked early and late, and had proved himself worthy to be a pioneer. When his mother and sister saw what he had done, they were greatly encouraged, and began to believe that he would soon carve a fine farm out of those acres of virgin forest.

He had also cleared and fenced a small space near the house, sufficient for a garden, and was anxious to break up his clearing and plant it, as the season was rapidly advancing.

Just as he was ready to begin this task, his horse was missing.

The family had brought two horses from Indiana; but one of them had died soon after they reached their destination, and this had left only George's horse, a beautiful brown mare named Molly. As the mare was their sole reliance for all their work and traveling, it was probable that she would soon learn the meaning of hard work.

As George had not yet found time to build a stable, he was in the habit of fastening Molly, when he did not need her, where she could pick a little forest grass. The night before he missed her he had picketed her in a glade at a little distance from the house, by tying a long halter rode to a low bush.

When he went to look for her in the morning she was gone.

He was badly upset by this unexpected misfortune, and was leaning against a tree, wondering what he would do about it, when Joe Scurl came in sight. Joe's wound was not yet healed; but he was able to roam the woods as he pleased, and he always carried his rifle as a matter of habit.

"Wot's the matter, young feller?" he asked. "You look as ef you might ha' lost suthin'."

"So I have," replied George. "I have lost my mare, and don't know what I am to do about it."

"That's bad. How did it happen?"

"I left her here last night, tied to that low bush. I suppose she must have pulled loose and gone away."

"Sho! I wunner, now, ef she did? Lemme see. Jest you stay right thar, young feller. Don't move a peg until I look around a bit."

The squatter examined the bush to which the mare had been tied, and then examined the glade around it. Although the ground was much trampled, his practiced eyes could easily read the story it told.

Finally he walked a little distance into the woods, and then returned to where George was standing.

"This yer's a bad piece o' business," he said.

"What do you mean?" asked George.

"The mar' never kim untied, and never pulled loose, and never went off of her own notion. She was stole."

"Are you sure of that? How do you know it?"

"It's as plain as printin' is to them as kin read. Yer's the mar's tracks all about the glade. She was shod, all four feet, shoes mighty well worn, too. It's easy enough to tell her track. But yer's the track of another hoss, and he warn't shod, and thar's a big chip outen his nigh forefoot. Right yer by the bush is a man's track, too, and it ain't yours nor mine. He got down and ontied the halter—see that track whar the heel is deep. Thar's whar he got onto his critter ag'in—see that track whar the ball o' the foot is so plain. Come along, now, and I'll show yer whar he rode off, leadin' your mar'."

George examined the tracks carefully, and it was clear to him that the squatter had described the exact state of affairs.

"It was arter the middle of the night when he tuck the mar'," remarked Joe.

"How do you know that?"

"Thar was a right smart shower about the middle of the night, and the tracks that lead away was made arter the shower. That's simple enough."

"Who stole the mare, then? Do you know that?"

"I mought give a guess. Anyhow, I reckon I mought show you whar she was tuck to."

"Will you do that, Joe? If you will, I will pay you for your trouble."

"I don't want no pay from you, Jawge. I did you dirt awhile ago, and ort to try to be a leetle helpful to you. I'll foller the trail, but I don't bargain fur fightin', 'cause this shoulder o' mine ain't fit to hold a gun ag'in. You had better go to the house and git your rifle."

"Why so?"

"'Cause it stands to reason that ef you find the feller who stole the mar', he won't be keen to give her up."

George went and got his rifle, and told his mother that Molly had got loose and strayed away, and he was going to hunt her.

Joe Scurl took up the trail at the glade and followed it without the least difficulty. Indeed, he scarcely looked at the ground he was passing over, and seemed to be so certain of his course that George suggested that he must know where the trail would lead them to.

"I've a notion that I do," replied Joe. "Anyhow, I know the horse with a chip outen his nigh fore-foot. Somebody must ha' thought he could impose onter you 'cause you're a new-comer."

George asked no more questions, but made sure that his rifle was in good order, and followed the squatter until they came in sight of a small cabin in the midst of the forest, there being no clearing around it worthy of the name.

"Thar's the place, Jawge," said Joe Scurl. "Yer's the mar's tracks, and yer's t'other critter's, both plain as print."

Yes, they were plain enough, and they led direct to the cabin.

"Who lives there?" asked George.

"Tom Mabry kinder lives thar. Leastways, that's his home; but I reckon he don't stay thar much, as he hain't got no people. Jest you wait yer a bit, Jawge, while I go and see if he's in."

The squatter stealthily approached the cabin and looked through a chink in the log wall. Then he returned to George, shaking his head.

"Thar ain't nobody thar," he said. "Tom Mabry's gone, and the mar's gone."

"But they will come back some time," suggested George.

"That's likely. Wot air you gwine to do, young feller?"

"I am going to get inside of that house and wait until the thief comes back with my horse."

"Durned ef that don't beat me. My old woman allers said that I was the biggest fool in the settlement, but I reckon you hold the age on me. Why, man alive, Tom Mabry is a desprit cuss, and thar's sure to be a skrimmage if you buck ag'in him."

"There will be a skrimmage if he don't give up my mare," stoutly replied George.

"Go along, then. I ain't fittin' to mix up in a fight, and will lay around yer in the woods."

George hastened to the log house. There was a door in the end that faced him, and he walked in, as the door had no lock or bolt. He saw before him a tumbled bed, a cold fireplace and a general appearance of discomfort. On the left side as he entered was a small window, closed with a wooden shutter.

He pushed open the shutter and stationed himself at the little window, where he could watch for the horse-thief and the horse.

He had a long time to wait, and found the task a very tedious one. He had no doubt that Joe Scurl had got tired and gone home. But he was kept up by an intense desire to recover his mare, and by his wrath at the man who had

stolen her. His temper did not improve while he was impatiently waiting at the window.

At last he was rewarded by the sound of a horse's footsteps, and he saw a man riding toward the cabin through the forest. The man was dark, roughly dressed, with a rascally cast of countenance, and carried a rifle. The horse he recognized at once as his own mare, Molly.

When the rider, who was of course Tom Mabry, had come within easy range—that is to say, within a couple of rods of the cabin—George cocked his rifle, shoved the muzzle out of the window, and hailed:

"Hello, there!"

Tom Mabry halted, and made a motion to raise his rifle.

"Don't try to pull your gun," warned George. "I've got you covered, and if you make a move you're a dead man. All you've got to do is to get off that mare, leave her where she is, and go away."

"Who are you, anyhow?" asked Mabry.

"I'm George Denston, and I own that mare which you borrowed last night. Get off, now, and clear out. I am tired of waiting here, and would rather shoot than talk. Get off on the right side, and be quick about it!"

There was nothing else for the horse-thief to do, and he hesitated no longer, but quietly slid off the mare, turned his back upon the cabin, and walked away, with his rifle under his arm.

George chirruped to Molly, who pricked up her ears as she recognized the familiar note.

But Tom Mabry, though he walked away peaceably enough, went no further than the nearest big tree, behind which he dodged, and waited for a chance to get a shot at the young fellow who had so unceremoniously deprived him of his stolen property.

George perceived that he had made a mistake. He should have forced Mabry to lay down his rifle when he left the mare. Instead of hunting a horse-thief, he found himself hunted by a horse-thief.

However, he believed that he knew how to get out of the scrape.

He chirruped to Molly again from the window, and stepped to the back door and called her. She knew the tone and the voice, and came to him at once. They were then screened by the corner of the house from the tree behind which Tom Mabry was stationed.

George jumped on the mare's back at once, gave her the word to go, and started her off at a gallop, keeping the cabin between him and Mabry's tree.

That individual saw the maneuver, changed his position quickly, and sent an ineffective bullet after the youth who had so neatly outwitted him.

When George had got safely away into the woods, Joe Scurl turned up in his track, with as much of a smile on his face as his usually rueful countenance could produce.

"That was a cute trick, Jawge," said he, "a mighty cute trick. I wouldn't ha' thought you could ha' done it, and you couldn't ef the mar' hadn't knowed you so well. I'm keen to bet that Tom Mabry is the maddest man just now this side of the Mississippi."

"All right, Jo," said George. "I've got my mare, and that's what I came for. Get on behind, and we'll go home."

George went home, and told his mother that he had found Molly, but said nothing of the theft or of the means by which he had recovered her. He had already learned that it would be better not to worry his anxious mother with all the difficulties and dangers that beset him in that new country.

But he mentioned the matter to Abe Lassiter, to whom he related his adventure. Lassiter frowned at first, and ended by laughing:

"Don't say anything about it at all," said he. "Let it go as a joke of Tom Mabry's, or a drunken spree. I reckon you have surprised him so much that he won't be apt to bother you again, and he will be glad enough to drop it, if you will."

George Denston took his friend's advice, and when he met Tom Mabry at a log-rolling, not long after the theft of his horse, the two were as respectful to each other as if there had never been any sort of a collision between them.

But the exploits of the young settler somehow got talked about, and he became known in that region by the title of Wide-awake George.

CHAPTER III.

THE PLAGUE OF SNAKES.

THE house that George Denston had erected for his family was built of rough logs. On the outside they were left as nature produced them, and on the inside they were merely "scalped" to give the walls a little neater appearance.

It was of course intended to be "chinked and daubed," the "chinking" being done by driving bits of rough wood into the crevices between the logs, and the "daubing" by covering the chinks with a coating of mud, thus keeping out the wind and rain. But George had so many more important tasks to do that he was compelled to neglect this work, and the weather was so mild that there was no necessity for hurry. Consequently he had only done a little "chinking" at spare moments when the summer was well advanced.

Mrs. Denston and Lucy slept down-stairs in the main room, and George and Ben bunked in the loft, which was reached by a ladder.

Against the wall of the main room, near the door, George had fixed a small shelf, on which was placed the pail that held drinking-water.

Mrs. Denston, who was usually wakeful, twice complained to her son that she had been annoyed at night by a peculiar sound, as of something lapping in the water at the pail.

On the third occasion she awoke Lucy, who was frightened by what she heard. The noise troubled them, because they could not guess what it was that made it.

George determined to investigate the matter. His mother made a pallet for him on the floor, and he laid down there to sleep, with a pistol and a knife within reach.

About the middle of the night Mrs. Denston's soft voice awakened him, and he raised his head.

He distinctly heard a sound like that of lapping in the direction of the water-pail; but it was such a slight and peculiar noise that he could not guess what caused it.

He quickly lighted a candle, and looked at the water-pail; but nothing was to be seen there, and he again laid down to sleep.

After awhile he was awakened by the numbness of his left arm, which was laying outside of the cover, and which suddenly became cold and painful.

At once he guessed that the limb had been encircled by a serpent, and, after the first involuntary shudder, he prepared to do battle with the intruder. He rightly judged that the reptile, being a constrictor, could not be a venomous snake.

"What is the matter, George?" asked Mrs. Denston, as he lighted a candle while the serpent tightened its folds about his arm.

"Lie down, mother," he replied. "There is no danger. I will tell you about it presently."

He grasped his bowie knife, sat up on his pallet, and looked at the unwelcome visitor.

The sight was enough to shock him, if not to frighten him.

An enormous black snake was coiled about his arm, and the pressure of its folds was every moment becoming more painful.

He quickly inserted his knife between his skin and that of the reptile, drew its sharp edge upward with a strong and rapid stroke, and cut the snake in two. The parts loosened themselves, and fell, writhing, upon the floor.

Mrs. Denston raised herself up in her bed, and shrieked with terror as she saw the severed monster. Lucy was spared a similar infliction, and George threw his vanquished enemy out of doors, where he measured it in the morning.

It was over six feet in length, and quite as large around as his arm.

"That must have been the horrid snake that lapped in our water-pail," said Mrs. Denston.

"It was that or another one," replied George. "But you shall not be troubled by them any more—at least, not in that way."

He dropped all his other employments until he had the house "chinked" so tightly that it would at least keep out the snakes.

But the death of the big black snake, and the protection of the house, did not settle the snake question.

A creek, which was called a river, ran through the Denston's section of land, and on the right bank of the creek was a rocky bluff.

One day in the latter part of summer, Lucy had gone alone to look for berries, and she halted on this bluff to rest and to admire the scenery. As she was about to seat herself on a stone, she was startled by a sharp and loud rattle near her. Looking quickly around, she saw a large rattlesnake in his coil, ready to spring. She started up, and ran home as fast as her feet would carry her. She was warned to keep away from the bluff, but did not need the warning, as she vowed that nothing would induce her to go within sight of it again.

A little later Ben was in the region of the bluff, and came home with a terrible story. He had looked down a crevice or break in the limestone, the bottom of which, according to his account, was literally swarming with rattlesnakes.

This was a serious matter. The existence of such a den of venomous serpents, at no great

distance from the house, was something that must be prevented if possible, and George consulted his unfailing oracle, Abe Lassiter.

"I don't doubt it at all," remarked Lassiter, when he had heard Ben Denston's story. "That bluff was always a great snake harbor, and it is as likely as not that they are more plenty than ever this season. We must do what we can toward cleaning them out."

"What can we do?" asked George.

"Get Joe Scurl to help, if you can, and I reckon you can, as he is death on snakes. Then we will go up there in the morning, and I will show you."

Joe Scurl was ready enough to aid in the extermination of a pile of snakes. The next morning he and George and Abe Lassiter, armed with axes and ash sticks, went to the bluff, taking Ben along to show them the den he had discovered.

There they found a cleft in the limestone, some twenty feet deep, and not over six feet wide at the top, the bottom of which, as well as they could see by looking over the edge, was alive with serpents. George Denston, after giving one glance at the reptiles, was not anxious to make a closer inspection; but Joe Scurl peered into the cavity, and eagerly examined the writhing reptiles.

"They's lots o' snakes thar," he announced—p'ison, and them as ain't p'ison—mighty nigh all kinds, 'cept the water-moccasin—but most o' 'em is apt to be rattlers. It'll be a good job to clean out that den."

The job was begun by laying rollers on the flat rock near the crevice. Logs were placed on the rollers, and on them was built a rude crib, long and narrow. The crib was filled with dry leaves, brush, and fragments of dead branches, and chunks of dry and green wood were piled over all. Then the mass was set on fire, and soon the crib was blazing with the heat of a big furnace.

When the fire was at its hottest, and the mass was thoroughly ignited, it was shoved forward on the rollers, and pushed over into the rocky hollow, where it fell to the bottom with a crash, sending up a cloud of smoke and sparks and cinders.

Even above the crackling of the burning wood could be heard the hissing of the maddened reptiles, as they writhed and rattled in their efforts to escape the fiery death.

Joe Scurl looked down into the hollow, and declared that he could see "whole oodles" of them, tangled in hideous masses, biting each other, rushing wildly about, or flinging themselves into the flames. The crib had broken into fragments, but the mass was burning fiercely at the bottom of the hollow.

"Look out, now!" exclaimed the squatter, as he drew back and seized his ash stick. "Them as kin git out will be crawlin' up yer, and we must go for 'em. Whenever you see a snake, kill it!"

He leaped to the other side of the crevice, leaving Abe Lassiter and George Denston on that side.

George turned pale, but grasped his stick firmly. He had a horror of snakes, but his first shudder at the sight of one was always followed

by an intense desire to kill it. He knew that the rattlesnakes, at least, were not likely to be dangerous unless they could throw themselves into coil, and he had been taught that ash sticks were a protection to those who held them.

The work began in earnest. To Joe Scurl, it seemed to be fun, though to George it was the severest task he had yet undertaken. The escaping snakes began to crawl up over the edge of the hollow, and out of holes and cracks in the rocks, and incessant activity was required for killing them as they appeared.

Joe Scurl danced about like a wild man, striking right and left with the greatest velocity, and accompanying the exercise with yells and whoops. Lassiter and George settled down to business seriously and earnestly, and the rocks resounded with the blows of their stout sticks as they struck at all the snakes they saw.

When there were no more snakes to be seen, and they rested from their labor, the young man was covered with perspiration, and was trembling with excitement.

"Why, Jawge," said Joe Scurl, "I do believe you're skeerd."

"So I am," admitted George. "I have been scared all through this job, and am not ashamed to say so. I am glad it is over."

The rock was covered with the bodies of serpents, big and little, poisonous and harmless, and even in death they were a hideous sight.

The dead reptiles were shoved over into the hollow, and more brush and logs were thrown upon the mass, to make a fire that would burn for several hours.

"I am as glad as George is that the job is over," said Abe Lassiter; "but it was well done, and that is a comfort. We will have to give that hole another dose in the spring, and if we keep it up the varmints will be apt to take the hint."

CHAPTER IV.

TROUBLE BREWING AND BEGINNING.

A pretty girl in a new settlement is always sure to become a bone of contention.

Lucy Denston, who was decidedly a pretty girl, was no exception to the rule. Her good looks and her bright and winning ways speedily became known to the young fellows for many miles around, and much of the popularity which the Denston family acquired in the neighborhood was due to Lucy's attractions.

George was not only proud of his handsome sister, but immensely fond of her, and he guarded her with a jealousy which gave all people to understand that there was to be "no fooling" in that quarter.

Lucy received invitations to everything in the shape of an entertainment or a social gathering that the neighborhood afforded, and George was also liberally invited, for his own sake, as well as on her account; but he found his work so constant and so laborious during his first season on the new place, that he needed all his spare time for rest, and Lucy was not willing to go anywhere unless George could accompany her.

Late in the fall, however, when the small crops that he had been able to raise were

gathered and his work was not so pressing, he began to find more time to spare. As he was then the owner of two horses, he felt that he could give his sister an occasional treat, such as would help to console her for her seclusion and privations.

Among the entertainments to which they were invited was a bran dance at the place of a neighbor who lived several miles away, and this was attended by George and Lucy, she riding his mare Molly, and he mounted on the big sorrel horse which he had lately bought.

The time of the full moon had been chosen for the festivity, as this was to be a moonlight bran dance, and of course it was out of doors, no room that the settlement afforded being large enough to hold the guests, to say nothing of giving them space for the exercise of their agility.

A circular place under the trees had been cleared of bushes and roots, and the earth was beaten down and covered thickly with bran. Some rude "puncheon" seats were prepared, and these completed the arrangements for the bran dance, with the exception of the refreshments, which were served in the house.

The girls were attired in their brightest calico dresses, with here and there a bit of lawn as a mark of superior pretensions. The young men, mostly tall and brawny fellows, were sumptuously arrayed in their best home-spun, with here and there a white collar or a "b'iled shirt." Many of them brought their rifles, and those who did not have rifles might be reasonably suspected of carrying pistols or knives upon their persons.

Many of them, also, were armed with weapons of another sort, destructive after another fashion. That is to say, they brought bottles of fiery whisky, which they took the precaution of concealing, before the dancing began, at the roots of trees, under logs, and in wood piles, all about the place. At every intermission of the festivities they could be seen strolling about in search of their hidden bottles, and privately refreshing themselves in secret places.

The most noticeable of those who strolled about in search of concealed whisky was Babe Welburn. This young man, who had been christened David, but retained the name by which he was known in his childhood, was the eldest son of comparatively wealthy parents, who had emigrated from Tennessee. His father was the owner of half a dozen "niggers," which secured for the family no little respect in a new country where that sort of property was scarce. Babe had been petted and humored and allowed to do as he pleased, and the consequence was that he pleased to do pretty badly, presuming upon his size and strength, as well as his father's standing in the settlement. He had become known as a "hard case" to such an extent that the daughters of the settlers were afraid of him, although his property expectations caused him to be considered as a "good catch."

Babe Welburn had loaded himself pretty liberally with whisky on his way to the bran dance, and during its progress he frequently resorted to a woodpile in which he had concealed a bottle of no small dimensions. The consequence was that he swaggered about with

more than his usual bluster, and that his manner toward the girls was more familiar than polite.

Lucy Denston took his eye early in the evening, and he asked her to dance with him. She had heard of him, and saw no reason to admire him, but did not wish to seem "offish," and consented.

In the course of that dance his breath and his rudeness were both offensive to her, and his subsequent applications met with a polite but decided refusal.

When the company gave signs of breaking up, Lucy summoned George to her side.

"I am afraid," she said, "that that drunken fellow, Babe Welburn, will want to go home with me."

"But you don't have to accept his company unless you want to," replied George, "and I hope you don't want to."

"But I am afraid he will make a fuss."

"I don't see how he can help himself, Lucy, and the best thing he can do is to behave himself. I will see that he shall not trouble you."

"I hope you will not make him angry, George. They tell me that he is a dangerous man."

"He may be dangerous to himself, but he had better not try to be dangerous to me, and he shall not bother a sister of mine. I despise the brute."

As Lucy anticipated, Babe Welburn came and asked her if he might be allowed to see her home, and he made his offer in such a matter-of-course style, as if he could not possibly receive no for an answer, that it was quite disagreeable to her.

She briefly replied that she was going home with her brother.

"That's no way to talk," said he. "Brothers don't count. You are the only girl here that I've taken any notice of, and my head is set on seeing you home. I can't allow you to say no."

"But you will have to, Mr. Welburn," firmly replied Lucy. "I came with my brother, and am going with him."

"That won't do at all, I tell you. My head is set on this thing."

George had been watching his sister, and was near enough to catch the meaning of this conversation. He came to her as soon as he saw the look of displeasure on her face.

"My sister is much obliged to you for your kindness, Mr. Welburn," said he; "but she cannot accept your offer. She came here with me, and prefers to go home with me."

"Is this your mix, then?" asked the young man, with an insolent sneer.

"Well, yes, it is," mildly replied George.

"I will see about that."

Babe Welburn gave Lucy's champion a black look, and walked away.

Lucy, who feared his ugly look, suggested that they should try to slip off without being observed; but George, who was always in favor of doing everything openly, said that he would go and get their horses, and they would ride away as they came.

As he went to get the horses, he met a young friend, who asked him what he had been doing to Babe Welburn.

"Nothing that he has a right to object to," replied George.

"I heard him cursing you just now. You had better look out for him. He is a dangerous man."

"I am a little dangerous, myself, if I am pushed too far," remarked George.

Near the horses he met Babe Welburn, who approached him with threatening looks.

"I say, Denston," said that young man, "how about that business of your sister?"

"What business?" demanded George.

"I want to know why it is that she don't want me to go home with her."

"Simply because she prefers to go home as she came, and I believe she has a right to do so."

"I believe it is you who have put her up to have a spite against me."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Welburn, and I am sure that she has no spite against you."

"I want you to tell her, then, that she must let me see her home to-night."

"I shall do nothing of the kind, and it is a waste of words to talk about it any more."

Welburn flew into a passion, and began to storm and curse.

"Do you want to pick a quarrel with me?" asked George.

"If I should, young chap, you would know it mighty quick, and you would get hurt. I carry a pistol, and am not afraid to shoot."

"Indeed!" exclaimed George, in a voice that was full of scorn. "Would you really dare to shoot at an unarmed man? What a high degree of courage that must require! I tell you, Babe Welburn, there is no greater coward than the man who depends upon a pistol for settling his quarrels, and I warn you that if you want to shoot at me, you had better watch your chance, and take aim when my back is turned to you."

George got his horses, mounted with Lucy, and rode home.

They were not molested on the way; but he felt that he had gained a foe in Babe Welburn.

CHAPTER V.

A BEAR-HUNT.

As Christmas drew near, George Denston was anticipating the slaughtering of his hogs.

He had five fine porkers which he was fattening for that purpose, in a small space that he had fenced in for them, at a little distance from the house. Near this inclosure he had built a pen, in which he kept several pigs.

One night he was awakened by the squealing of the hogs, and hastened out to see what was the matter with them. Finding nothing to justify their complaints, he went back to bed.

Again he was aroused by a similar racket, and again he went out to the inclosure. The fattening hogs were awake and uneasy, but were all there.

Looking further for the cause of the disturbance, he discovered that two of his pigs were missing.

As the night was so dark that nothing could be done toward the detection or pursuit of the thief, he guarded the inclosure until morning.

Then he examined the pen, and discovered the scratches and tracks of some large animal. As he was unable to judge what kind of a beast it

was that had been robbing him, he mounted his horse, and rode over to Abe Lassiter's to consult the oracle.

Lassiter, who was always obliging to his young friend, rode over and inspected the pig-pen and the ground near it, and soon came to a conclusion concerning the depredator.

"It was a b'ar," said he.

"A bear?" exclaimed George.

"Nothing shorter, and it's strange, too. I haven't seen a bear about here—that is, near about—in two or three years. Here's the critter's tracks, plain as print, and there's no mistaking those scratches on the logs. Here's bits of fur lying about, too. The cuss has got two of your nice pigs, and he won't be satisfied now until he carries off the whole batch."

"What can I do about it?" asked George, who could not reconcile himself to the thought of losing his pigs.

"We might build a trap," replied Lassiter.

"How is that done?"

"We might dig a deep hole at the side of the pen, sink some sharp-pointed stakes in the bottom, and cover it lightly, so that the crittur would tumble in and hurt himself. Or we might swing a log so that it would fall on him and break his back. But it would be a sight of trouble to build a trap, and it might ketch some human."

"But I must do something," George insisted.

"Of course you must, and I think, on the whole, that the best thing we can do is to track the b'ar and kill him. I would be mighty glad to get hold of some b'ar-meat, anyhow."

"How can we find him?"

"My dogs will trail him fast enough, and I reckon we two ought to be able to kill him. Go and get your rifle, George."

George went for his rifle, telling his mother that he was going to hunt, but saying nothing about a bear. He also took the precaution to put in his pockets a pair of derringer pistols—single barrels, and carrying a heavy bullet—decidedly a deadly weapon at close range.

Abe Lassiter got his dogs, and put them on the trail of the bear. They were animals of no particular breed, or of a large mixture of breeds, but were, as he said, "heavy coon-dogs," and he had no doubt of their ability and willingness to find the bear, though they could not be depended on for a fight.

The dogs, Brash and Boss, took up the trail in fine style, and followed it through the woods at a rapid rate.

It led them direct to the river and they followed it down a gorge until they reached the foot of the bluff at the top of which the war had been waged against the snakes. Finally they stopped at a hole in the rock, and barked vigorously.

"This is the place," said Lassiter. "The critter has his den in there, sure; but it must be a late thing, or we would have heard of him before now."

He tried to induce the dogs to enter the hole, and Brash finally disappeared inside; but he soon came out with his tail between his legs, whining, and showing strong symptoms of fear.

"The b'ar is at home, and he don't want to

be disturbed after his breakfast," said Abe. "I don't see, George, but we will have to go in and see what we can do with our rifles, as those dogs would never fetch him out."

George expressed a willingness to go in.

"I wonder if there's more than one of them in there," remarked Abe. "I am powerful fond of b'ar-meat, and the critters must be fat now; but I really wouldn't care to tackle two of them in that hole."

The mouth of the den was a cleft in the rock, in which two men could easily walk upright for a little distance; but at the far end was a low and dark hole, which could only be entered in a kneeling or stooping posture.

The two hunters examined their rifles carefully, cocked them, and walked abreast into the cleft.

When they reached the hole, they halted, kneeled down, and peered into the darkness.

As their eyes became accustomed to the gloom they could see a black object, like a heavier chunk of darkness, lying down at the extremity of the hole. They could also catch the twinkle of a pair of small but bright eyes.

"Looks to me as if he is lying down, with his nose on his fore paws, like a dog," whispered Lassiter. "Anyhow, he is lying down, with his face toward us."

"We can hit him easily enough," remarked George.

"Yes, and I wish we could be as sure of killing him. We must run our chances, though. Take a good aim at one of those eyes, George, and give him a blizzard. My shot will follow yours."

George took a careful aim, though he was a little nervous, as he had never hunted such game before, and pulled the trigger of his rifle.

Abe Lassiter pulled the next instant, and the reports of the two guns sounded like thunder in that narrow place, and filled the hole with smoke.

A deep growl told the hunters that the bear had been aroused, and that they had not yet killed him.

More growls followed, and they could see the black mass rise and move toward them.

"Run, George!" exclaimed Abe, and he turned and ran out of the mouth of the den.

George started to follow him, but had taken only two or three steps, when he turned and faced the dark hole.

The bear rushed out from his hiding-place, gaining speed as he advanced, and had cleared the hole and nearly reached George when the young fellow turned and faced him.

Within a few feet of his foe he raised himself on his hind feet for a death-hug.

George, who was standing before him in nearly an erect position, felt the hot breath of the great beast blown in his face.

He also saw that there was blood in the bear's mouth, and that one of his fore paws was hanging down, limp and useless.

The boy was pale, but resolute. He had quickly drawn and cocked his two derringers.

As the bear rose on his hind feet he presented both pistols, reaching them forward until they nearly touched the fur, and fired them with one report at the hairy breast.

The bear tottered, toppled over on the sloping and slippery rock, and fell toward the hole from which he had just emerged.

George sunk upon one knee, but neither advanced nor retreated.

Abe Lassiter had just turned the rock at the mouth of the den, and had halted there to load his rifle, supposing that he was of course followed by his young friend.

Hearing the double report of the derringers, he hastily rammed down a bullet and stepped back into the cleft.

Before him he saw George Denston, kneeling on the rock, and just beyond him was the bear, struggling in the agonies of death.

"My God!" exclaimed Lassiter, as he ran to his young friend. "What's this? Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," replied George.

"And you have killed the bear! How did you do it?"

George showed his two derringers.

"And you staid here and shot him with those when I ran away. I never heard the beat of it. Why, boy, it was almost certain death for you to stop here."

"It was death to the bear," remarked George.

"How could you do it? I thought you were running out with me. I told you to run. Why didn't you do it?"

"Now you are going to expose me," said George, very meekly. "I was willing enough to run, and started to run, but couldn't get any further than this. My right foot caught in a hole in the rock, and it is in there now so solid that I can't stir it."

Abe Lassiter hastened to relieve his young friend, but was compelled to break the rock before he could extricate the foot.

"Anyhow," said he, "it was a big thing to stand up to your work and send two bullets into that crittur when he was right on you. It shows that you've got the best kind of nerve, and that those derringers of yours are worth a pile in a close scrimmage. You sha'n't lose any of the credit of this because you happened to get your foot caught."

They hauled out the beast, and found it to be a large he-bear, and as fat, so Abe said, as butter.

Lassiter proceeded to skin this royal game, while George hastened to the house for a horse.

They divided the meat, and the skin was left to him who had killed the bear, as a well-deserved trophy. George confessed that he had gained in bear-meat enough to pay him for the loss of his pigs.

When Abe Lassiter told the story of this bear-hunt, he did not fail to give his young friend plenty of credit, but omitted to make any mention of the accident that had prevented him from retreating.

So another big exploit was scored to the credit of "Wide-awake George."

CHAPTER VI.

TROUBLE AT A LOG-ROLLING.

DURING the winter Lucy Denston accompanied her brother to several neighborhood gath-

erings, but did not happen to meet Babe Welburn at any of them.

She heard, however, from various sources, that the young aristocrat of the backwoods was "half-crazy about her." He was drinking harder than ever, and had been heard to declare that he meant to have Lucy Denston for his wife, and that no power on earth should hinder him.

When Lucy heard this she trembled with fear, and George frowned as he wondered what measures the desperate and unprincipled young man would take to secure his object.

Lucy refused to attend any more gatherings, and did not see her strange suitor again until near the end of winter, when he made her a visit as unwelcome as it was unexpected.

On this occasion he rode his finest horse, was dressed "to the nines," and was, for a wonder, entirely sober. It was evidently his intention to make a good impression.

The impression he produced in the Denston family was that his visit must mean something, and it did.

A man had lately come into the neighborhood and started a singing-school, and Babe Welburn wished Lucy to attend it in his company.

She made her excuses as well as she could, alleging her household duties and her mother's feeble health; but these did not satisfy him, and finally she said that she did not go anywhere except with her brother, and could not make him an exception to the rule.

"That is only a pretense," angrily exclaimed Welburn. "I know that you went with Lon Brewer to Hugh Craik's wedding."

Then Lucy's spirit rose, and she flatly declared that she would not go anywhere with Babe Welburn under any circumstances.

This remark, and the tone of decision that accompanied it, settled the question, and he left the house downcast and indignant.

George Denston went with him to the fence where his horse was hitched, and came in for the wrath which he had refrained from visiting upon Lucy.

"I would like to know, Denston," said he, "why it is that your sister has got a spite against me."

"I am sure that my sister has no spite against you or any other person," mildly replied George.

"Why is it, then, that she won't go with me to the singing-school or anywhere else?"

"She has given you her reasons, and that ought to be sufficient to satisfy a gentleman."

"Do you mean to hint that I am not a gentleman? You had better take care what you say. I've got a grudge against you, anyhow, as I believe that you are at the bottom of this business."

"You may believe what you please, Mr. Babe Welburn, but I can tell you that, until you drink less whisky and learn better manners, a girl who respects herself will have a good enough reason for refusing to go anywhere with you."

"That's your notion, is it? Well, I can get along without learning anything that an Indiana scrub can teach me. Perhaps you do not know that I am doing your folks an honor in coming to this house."

"I would never have thought of looking at it in that light," coolly replied George.

"I've a great mind to give you a good thrashing, to teach you better sense."

"Perhaps you might make a miss of it. But if you think that thrashing her brother is the best way to court a girl, just pitch in."

Babe Welburn did not pitch in, but sullenly mounted his horse and rode away.

In the spring George Denston had a log-rolling.

With the help of Ben he had cleared and fenced quite a piece of ground during the winter, and he called upon the neighbors to help him pile the logs together, so that they could be burned, thus completing the clearing of the ground. There was not much "rolling" about it, as the logs were mostly carried by squads of men upon lengths of sapling, called "sticks," to the place where they were to be piled.

The neighbors turned out in goodly numbers, and among them, to the surprise of everybody, came Babe Welburn, who was usually too much opposed to work to bear a hand at house-raising and log-rolling.

On this occasion, though he did not go to the house to partake of the refreshments that were prepared for the company, he proved himself quite active and efficient, working with a will, and generally in the squad to which George Denston was attached.

George had as little as possible to say to him, treating him merely with politeness, while Welburn seemed to be very friendly; but the former noticed that he made frequent visits to the flask that he had brought in his coat pocket, and occasionally noticed a dangerous gleam in his eye that betokened possible trouble.

The trouble did not come until the day was nearly ended, and then it came in a way that George could not have anticipated.

A short and heavy log was to be carried to a pile, and four young men had rolled it onto their sticks for the purpose of lifting it. One of these four was George Denston, who was at the forward end, and his partner at the stick was Babe Welburn.

George saw that the log would have to be carried for a part of the distance along a side hill, and proposed that they should get more help.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Babe Welburn. "We can carry the log easy enough, if you are any account."

"I can carry my end," said George; "but we will all have to lift alike, or somebody may get hurt."

The four bent to the work, and lifted the log. It was quite a strain to George; but he felt equal to the task when he got "straightened up."

The side hill along which the log was to be carried was a short and narrow one, but was pretty steep, and was muddy and slippery. As George was on the lower side, his work was doubly difficult, and he was obliged to move slowly and carefully to keep his footing.

Suddenly, when they had reached the worst part of the route, Babe Welburn canted his stick up, throwing the weight of the log upon his staggering partner.

George at once guessed that the object of this trick was to force him to loose his hold and

drop his stick, so that the log might fall upon him and crush him or seriously injure him.

At the same moment his foot slipped.

But he set his teeth, gripped the stick tighter than ever, and regained his footing.

"Jump out, Tom!" he said to the man behind him, who had a much better chance to get out of the way of the log than he had.

Then he dropped his stick, and sprung forward.

The falling log grazed his feet, and he fell over into the mud, but out of the reach of danger, while the log went crashing down to the foot of the descent.

He picked himself up, and walked to the top of the slope, where his late stick partner stood, laughing at him.

"Why, you are no good at all," said Welburn. "You can't tote a log worth a cent. You have no more strength than a kitten."

But he stopped his laughing as the person he was laughing at approached him.

George Denston's face, where it was not covered with mud, was pale as death, and his eyes blazed with an unusual fire.

"You infernal scoundrel!" he exclaimed, as he shook his fist in Welburn's face.

"What do you mean?" asked the other, stepping back.

"You threw that log over on me, so that it might smash me, and you did it on purpose."

"You are a liar!"

"You put two lives in peril, so that you might gain a dirty bit of revenge, and you are no better than a murderer, you mean, cowardly skunk!"

Babe Welburn doubled up his fist and struck viciously at his accuser, who easily warded off the blow. Then a struggle began that brought all the other log-rollers running to the spot.

Their sympathies were with George, especially when the other two men who had had hold of the fallen log explained the facts of the case. Therefore he was sure of fair play.

Though tall and strong for his years, he was still a little fellow compared with Welburn, and on this account the odds seemed to be largely against him. But he had been trained to the skillful use of his hands, and the contest had hardly begun, when he showed the results of his training, to the astonishment of the bystanders.

He maneuvered so as to keep his antagonist on the slope below him, thus neutralizing the latter's advantage in height. His clean and temperate life showed itself in his hard muscles and healthy lungs, and he had a just indignation to back him, while the other knew that he had been guilty of a mean and cowardly trick.

Welburn soon perceived the superior science of his opponent, and tried to rush in and clinch; but every effort was prevented by the lithe and active young fellow, who never failed to slip away from his grasp, or to plant a telling blow on his face or breast.

He speedily showed the effects of his punishment, and fought wildly, striking out with more vigor than discretion, and puffing and panting like a steam-engine.

Then George saw his chance, and ran in, seizing his antagonist around the waist, tripping

him quickly, and throwing him heavily on his back in the mud.

"Give it to him, George!" shouted the crowd, most of whom were glad enough to see the big bully worsted in such a fair fight and for such a good cause.

But George put in only one telling blow on his antagonist's mouth, to stop the stream of curses that flowed from it, and held him firmly to the ground until he cried "enough."

Babe Welburn was a sorry sight when he rose to his feet. One eye was closed, his face was bleeding, and his clothes were covered with mud.

"You will pay for this yet," he said, as he walked away.

George made no answer to his threat, and he put on his coat, mounted his horse, and rode off.

CHAPTER VII.

A COON-HUNT, AND BIG GAME.

SHORTLY after the unfortunate difficulty at the log-rolling, Joe Scurl suggested to George Denston that they should indulge in a coon-hunt, and George gladly consented. He was as fond of coon-hunts as any plantation darky could be, and Ben, who had never seen one, was eager to have an experience of the sport.

The first necessity of a successful coon-hunt is a good coon-dog. In fact, it is the dog that does the hunting, and the human hunters accompany him for the purpose of securing the game when he has cornered it.

Joe Scurl boasted the ownership of the best coon-dog in the country. Abe Lassiter's Brash and Bose were well enough in their way; but his Snap was "a heavy coon-dog from Sugar Creek," unequaled at finding and treeing a coon, and he could "tackle the worst old coon that ever wore teeth, and chaw him limbless."

This marvelous dog, which was not remarkable for beauty or any other accomplishments than coon-hunting, was of course the most important member of the party. Joe Scurl and George carried rifles, mainly as a matter of habit, and Ben bore an ax for cutting down the trees in which the coons took refuge. George also put his two derringers in his pocket, as he had been a firm believer in their usefulness since his fight with the bear.

It was a moonlight night when they went to the river bottom to look for coons, and the indications were good for plenty of sport.

They had been out but a little while when Snap started a coon, and when the hunters reached him he was barking vigorously at the foot of a young hickory tree, near the top of which the coon could be plainly seen.

It was the work of but a few minutes to cut down the hickory, and as it fell the attention of all was concentrated upon the coon and the dog.

His coonship had hardly touched the ground, and had not had a moment's time to recover from his surprise, when Snap was upon him, and the hunters ran up to see the fight.

But it was not a very interesting struggle, as the coon was a young one, and was taken at a great disadvantage.

After a brief rough-and-tumble of biting and

snarling, Snap settled the case of the coon, and Snap's master slung the carcass over his shoulder.

"Talk about coon-dogs!" exclaimed Joe. "Why, thar ain't a dog in the hull o' Racken-sack, to say nothin' o' this yer settlement, as 'ud be a patchin' to my Snap. Ef he could on'y climb a tree, thar wouldn't be a live coon left within ten mile o' yer."

Nobody objected to the praise of Snap, and he set out in search of another coon.

But it did not seem to be a first-rate night for coons, and they tramped about the bottom fully an hour before he started another "varmint." This one he quickly treed in a large and knurly oak, nearly three feet in diameter at the butt.

Joe Scurl walked around the tree, and looked at it with an air of disgust.

"It ain't gwine to pay us to cut down that tree," said he. "I don't see why the critters couldn't ha' tuck to a saplin'. I hate to shoot a coon, as it spiles the fun, and don't do justice to the dogs."

The coon was soon located on a large limb that reached out far from the trunk, and Ben proposed to climb the tree and chop off the limb. He was "boosted" up, and soon made lively play with his ax among the leaves and branches.

The attention of the dog was attracted from the tree to the coon, and the branch soon cracked and fell, "shedding" the coon, which had no sooner touched the ground than it was seized by Snap.

A lively tussle ensued, and the coon, which was an old and vigorous one, fought so fiercely that the dog had no easy task to conquer it; but victory finally perched upon the banner of Snap, and his master slung another dead coon over his shoulder.

He was sent on to search for another coon, and the hunters had another tramp.

They lost sight of Snap for awhile; then they heard him barking vociferously, and finally found him at the foot of a swamp oak that was heavy with branches and foliage.

"That is jest the owdaciousest coon-dog I ever see or heerd of," remarked his master. "He kin start up more coons in a night than any three dogs that kin be fatched together. By the way he barks, he must ha' treed the biggest kind of a varmint up thar, and the tussle will be suthin' wu'th lookin' at."

Ben Denston, who was foremost in the hunt, and always eager to be the first to catch sight of the game, ran forward toward the tree, while the others followed more slowly, looking up as they went, and peering sharply into the dense leafage of the oak.

"Cre-ation!" exclaimed Ben, as he halted near the tree. "You may well say that's a big coon. It's bigger than Snap himself."

"Run away, Ben!" shouted Joe Scurl, who had caught sight of the object at the same instant. "Run back, boy! It's a pant'er!"

"A panther?" exclaimed George, cocking his rifle as he spoke.

"Yes, a pant'er! Run, boy! Oh, lordy! thar he comes!"

Ben had started to run as a dark body shot from the tree through the air, and the next

moment the boy was sprawling on the ground.

But Ben, in his flurry, had run toward the tree, instead of from it, and the panther had overshot his mark.

He had struck the boy sufficiently to knock him down, and had landed just beyond him. No sooner had he reached the ground than Snap seized him, probably laboring under the impression that he was some new kind of a coon.

But the struggle between the dog and the panther was too unequal to last long, and it was at once evident that Snap, eager and "owdacious" though he was, could afford his antagonist no sort of amusement.

Nobody had a clearer conception of this fact than Snap's master, who ran forward with the intention of taking his dog's part in the fight.

"Shoot him, Jawge!" he shouted. "Shoot the varmint, or Snap's a goner!"

George had run toward his brother, and was within a few yards of the panther when he struck the ground. He hastened forward with his cocked rifle when the dog seized the beast, but was thinking of Ben's safety much more than of Snap's.

He was willing enough to shoot; but how to shoot with effect, and without doing more damage than he wanted to do, was a serious question.

The panther and the dog were rolling and tumbling about upon the ground, in an almost inextricable mass, covering several yards of space in their struggle, and the barks, yelps, screeches and snarls were quite confusing.

Ben was trying to extricate himself from the tangle, but had not yet got out of reach of the combatants, and it was hard for the quickest eye to judge when and where to shoot.

George was not a person to hesitate, or to take any half-way measures.

He stepped right up to the panther before he could free himself from the hold of the dog, watched his chance, put the muzzle of his rifle to his ear, and fired.

The charge blew a hole through the head of the ugly beast, which rolled over, and, after a few convulsive struggles, it was dead.

This entire "skrimmage," from the panther's spring until his death, though it has taken so many words to describe it, occupied but a few seconds of time, and it was all over when Joe Scurl reached the spot.

He at once dropped his rifle, picked up Snap, and began to examine his wounds, with many lamentations over the damage that had been done to "the heaviest coon-dog that ever came from Sugar Creek."

Ben Denston had scrambled to his feet, and his brother hastened to him, as if he were even a more important personage than a coon-dog.

He was trembling all over, but with excitement rather than with fear, and his clothes were torn, and his face and hands were bleeding.

"Are you badly hurt?" asked George.

"Not much, I guess," replied the boy. "I am scratched up a little, but don't think it amounts to anything. Hark, George! What's that?"

It was a loud, shrill, and unearthly scream, something weird and frightful to hear in the forest at night, and enough to send a chill through the warmest blood.

The next instant the creature that uttered the yell—the mate of the dead panther—appeared from the depths of the forest, coming toward the group with great leaps, lashing its tail, and splitting the air with yells.

"It is another panther!" exclaimed George, "Joe, come and shoot it, quick!"

But Joe Scurl was so intently occupied in examining the wounds of his dog, that he seemed neither to see nor to hear anything else.

George hastily picked up the squatter's rifle, and cocked it.

"Run, Ben!" he said, as he turned to face the new foe.

But Ben had no idea of running, when he saw his brother stand his ground.

As the panther came on, George fired the rifle with a quick aim.

The beast was hit, but the shot neither stopped nor delayed its progress, and George drew his derringers, and cocked and fired them as rapidly as he could, without giving an inch of ground.

But a panther, like other members of the cat tribe, is very tenacious of life, and usually requires a great deal of killing.

As George fired his last shot, the beast made its final spring, and struck him on the breast, knocking him over, though blood was pouring from its wounds.

It might have made an end of the brave lad's life before its own death-struggle came; but Ben stood there with his ax raised, and at once brought the keen edge down upon the back of the brute's neck, nearly chopping off its head.

George threw off the big body, and rose to his feet, dripping with blood, and not until then did Joe Scurl seem to comprehend what had happened.

"Why, boys," said he, "this yer's been a powerful skrimmage, and Snap is mighty bad hurt, though I reckon he'll git over it, with good keer."

George felt inclined to consign Snap to Halifax; but he said nothing, and contented himself with ascertaining that only a small portion of the blood that covered him was his own.

"I reckon we won't hunt any more coons to-night," said Joe. "We've struck bigger game, and Snap is done up. Now, Jawge, git out yer knife, and I'll show you how to take the hide off'n a pant'er."

The pelts were soon removed from the two big beasts, and Joe proposed, as a division of the spoils, that he should keep the coons, and the two brothers should take the panther-skins.

"You've 'arned 'em, like Snap 'arned the coons," said he. "Thar ain't no mistake about that."

This arrangement was satisfactory to George, who bundled up the panther-pelts, and slung them over his shoulder.

"I say, George," remarked Ben, when they were nearly home, "we are in a pretty bad fix, to look at. I suppose we will have to tell mother all about it."

"Of course we must."

"I am afraid she won't let me go coon-hunting again."

CHAPTER VIII.

GEORGE DENSTON'S DUEL.

It was soon made evident to George Denston that the thrashing which he administered to Babe Welburn at the log-rolling had not ended his feud with that backwoods aristocrat.

Welburn had brooded over his wrongs, and had soaked them in whisky, until he came to the conclusion that he must have satisfaction for the treatment he had received, and he saw but one way to get it openly and above-board.

As George was plowing in his new ground one morning, an acquaintance of his named Steve Vancil rode up, hitched his horse, and came over to where he was working.

"I have come from Babe Welburn," said Vancil, "and I suppose you know what I am after."

"But I don't, though," replied George. "What is it?"

"Babe wants to fight you."

"I should think he had got enough out of me in that line."

"It is not that sort of a fight that he is hunting."

"What kind of a fight does he want, then?"

"Here is a note that he sent, and I reckon it will explain what he wants, better than I can tell you."

George read Babe Welburn's note, which was nothing less than a challenge to fight a duel, couched in the language required by "the code."

"I understand this well enough," said George; "but there is one thing that is wrong about it. He says that he demands the satisfaction due to a gentleman, and I don't believe that I consider him a gentleman."

"That won't do at all," said Vancil. "I would not have brought his message unless he was a gentleman, and if you say that he is not a gentleman, that reflects upon me."

"I hope you don't want to pick a quarrel with me, too," remarked George.

"Not if can help it; but this business must be attended to in the right shape."

"Well, I suppose I must try to satisfy him; but I can't be in a hurry about it. I shall have to find a second, and consult with him, and that will take time."

"I hope you don't mean to back out, Denston?"

"I will tell you just what I do mean to do, Steve Vancil. I mean to act on my own judgment, and to do what I believe to be the right thing. This is a busy time of the year with us farmers, though I don't suppose that Mr. Babe Welburn allows any work to worry him. I can't afford to hurry myself to please him, but will attend to his affair as soon as I reasonably can. If that don't suit you, I am sorry; but it is the best I can do."

Vancil was obliged to be satisfied, and George kept on plowing until dinner time, thinking over the new trouble that had been forced upon him.

After dinner he rode over to Abe Lassiter's, and showed him the challenge.

"This is a bad piece of business," said George's oracle, "and I am sorry that the trouble has come to this point."

"So am I," replied George—"sorry on account of my folks, more than on my own account. What had I better do about it?"

"As it is a sure enough challenge, I am afraid you will have to accept it. If you should not, Babe Welburn would feel himself at liberty to jayhawk you, and you would get no sympathy. It is the custom of the country, you know."

"I had already made up my mind to accept the challenge, but in my own way."

"Yes; as you are the challenged party, you have the choice of weapons, and, as you are such a fine shot with a pistol, you will have at least as good a chance as he has."

"That is not exactly the point I am driving at," replied George. "I would hate to stand up and shoot at a man in that way, knowing that I might kill him. I propose that you shall act as my second, and that my two derringers shall be the pistols to be used. The seconds shall choose a disinterested man to load the pistols, who shall load one of them with powder and ball, and the other with ball only. Babe Welburn and I shall toss up for the choice of pistols, and then toss up for the first fire. We will each take the same risk, and neither will know whether he holds a pistol that can kill."

"That is fair enough, and he can't object to it," said Lassiter. "But I would rather, for your sake that you should fight in the old-fashioned way."

George preferred the arrangement that he proposed, and Abe Lassiter went off to confer with Steve Vancil and settle the preliminaries, while his young friend returned to his work.

Babe Welburn objected strongly to the style of encounter that his antagonist had settled upon, and spoke of it as "a cowardly makeshift, entirely unfit for gentlemen;" but his objections were overruled by his second, who saw nothing cowardly or unequal in George's proposal.

"It is just as fair for one as it is for the other," said Steve Vancil, and the terms were soon agreed upon, and it was settled that the encounter should take place the next morning, in a glade on Abe Lassiter's land.

George Denston, it must be confessed, looked forward to this contest with no little uneasiness. If he should fall, he would leave his mother and sister with no protector or bread-winner but his brother Ben, and that would be a great calamity for them. He also considered it very unfair that his life should be pitted against that of Babe Welburn, who had nobody dependent upon him, and who was no better than a drone in a hive.

But it was true, as Abe Lassiter had told him, that he could not maintain any decent standing in the settlement if he should refuse the challenge, and he thought that he might as well be killed as be driven away.

Besides, he felt that in any event he had shifted the responsibility from his own shoulders. If he should happen to draw the loaded pistol, and should happen to kill his antagonist, it could not be said that he had done the deed intentionally, as it must be charged to "luck." If he should happen to be the victim, "luck" would be responsible for his fate.

His reasoning may not be entirely satisfactory

to a moralist; but it was the best he had for the occasion.

Of course the young fellow could say nothing of this serious matter to his family, who would learn of the duel only by its result, and he went to the place of meeting with no company but Abe Lassiter.

When he reached the glade he was surprised to discover several young men there, and more came with Babe Welburn and Steve Vancil. Tidings of the expected encounter had quietly gone about, and it naturally attracted as many as heard of it.

George also perceived that the most of those on the ground were Welburn's cronies; but he relied on the presence of his faithful friend, Abe Lassiter, and of Lon Brewer, whom he had reason to consider friendly to his family, and he had no fear of unfair treatment.

Welburn had nerved himself for the occasion with frequent "horns"—in fact, his nerves could never be relied upon unless they were stimulated—and he showed no little excitement; but his opponent viewed the arrangements coolly, if not with indifference.

There was naturally a little difficulty in the choice of a disinterested person to load the pistols; but the seconds finally settled on Lon Brewer, though Welburn objected to him.

"What's the use?" Vancil asked his principal. "As you are going to toss up for the pistols and for the first shot, I don't see how any trick can creep in."

Lon Brewer took the pistols away, and loaded them according to the agreement. Then he brought them back, and laid them on a stump, covering them with his handkerchief so that only the butts could be seen.

In the toss-up for the derringers George Denston won the choice, and he took the one which was nearest to him, as there was really no choice.

In the toss up for the first shot Babe Welburn won, and it was with a triumphant air that he seized his pistol, though his exultation might well have been tempered by a doubt as to whether the pistol was loaded with a ball.

The ground was paced off, and the two opponents took their places at the stations marked for them.

George Denston was pale, but gave no sign of excitement or fear. He presented his right side to his antagonist, and his pistol was held by his right hand against his right leg.

Babe Welburn, with a malicious look on his face, was about to take aim over his arm, when George's second promptly stopped him.

"None o' that!" shouted Abe Lassiter, "none o' that, or I'll shoot you where you stand!"

As the bystanders were not disposed to back him up in this bit of unfair play, Welburn assumed the proper position, and fired at the word.

George Denston stood there unhurt!

It was evident to him from the report of the pistol, if not to the others, that fortune had favored him, and that there had been no ball in the shot that was fired at him.

A look of vexation and disappointed malice settled on Babe Welburn's face, as he turned so as to present his side to his antagonist.

George raised his derringer, and glanced along the barrel.

The opposing second had begun to count, *One—*

When, to the astonishment of all, Babe Welburn turned and fled.

"It's a trick! It's a swindle!" he shouted, as he scampered to the nearest tree.

George fired in the air.

"That is what I meant to do, anyhow," he said, as he stepped forward and picked up the weapon which the other had dropped.

"It's a trick!" repeated Welburn, when he was overhauled by his friends. "That fellow knew which pistol had the ball in it. Was I going to stand there and let him shoot me down like a dog?"

But this view of the case found no favor even with his closest friends, and his second did not condescend to accompany him when he sneaked away from the ground.

"I don't think he will trouble you any more, George," said Abe Lassiter, as he went home with his young friend.

In fact, the ridicule of his acquaintances was too much for Babe Welburn to endure, and he soon left the neighborhood. His father said that he had gone to a college in Virginia.

CHAPTER IX.

A BIG HONEY FIND.

SUMMER work went on thrivingly at the Denston place. By that time George and Ben had quite a little farm to tend, which they had carved out of the forest by their own unaided labor.

It is true that only a small portion of the land they tilled was completely cleared; but they had fenced in a pretty big field, in which they had chopped down the small trees, cleaned off the brush, and "girdled" the large timber by cutting rings around the base so as to deaden the trees. They were thus able to cultivate the field, leaving the dead trees to be cleared off at their leisure, or to rot and fall in the course of years.

Their crops were doing finely, their "truck patch" was flourishing, Molly had produced a fine colt which was Ben's pet and pride, a calf had been born, the grounds were alive with chickens and ducks and geese, and there was good reason to believe that the second year of their backwoods farming would find the family self-supporting.

When George's coon was "laid by," and he was glad that the job was off his hands, Joe Scurl came to him, and proposed a hunt.

"I hope it is not another coon-hunt for panthers," remarked George.

"No, indeedy. It's a heap easier and safer thing than that, and it's a daylight job, too. The kind of a hunt I'm arter now is a bee-hunt."

"That is quite out of my line, Joe. I know nothing about bees, except that they sting, though they can't bite or scratch."

"Now you're jokin'; but I ain't. I tell you, Jawge, I've got holt of jest the biggest thing out in the bee line, and you are the on'y one I mean to let into it. Ef I don't astonish you, may I never skin another coon in this world!"

"What is it, Joe?"

"I've noticed when I've been out in the woods that thar's more wild bees flyin' this season than I ever see afore. The woods is full of 'em. I've noticed, too, that when they git loaded they allers take one course. It stands to reason that thar's a powerful big settlement of 'em somewhar, and the man who kin find it is liable to pack home a 'stronary pile o' honey. I've had it in my head to go arter them bees; but I allowed that I wanted a pardner, and I says to myself, says I, Jawge Denston is the pardner for me, and the only chap I mean to let into this thing."

"I am ever so much obliged to you, Joe, and will go with you to hunt the bees whenever you are ready. When shall it be?"

"To-morrow mornin' airly."

The next morning the two hunters set out, Joe armed only with a small tin box containing a little honey, and a pocket compass. George wanted to carry his rifle, but was persuaded to leave it at home, and to take in its place an ax, to cut down the tree in which they would probably find the honey.

They went into the woods, to the place where Joe had last noticed the wild bees, and he pointed them out to his companion as they were flying pretty thickly about.

Then he opened his box, placed it on a log, and set his compass near it, and the two hunters stationed themselves within easy sight of the box.

Pretty soon a bee lighted on the box, loaded himself with honey, and flew away.

"Jest you notice the course he takes," said Joe. "That bee will go as straight to his home as straight kin be. He takes what we call a bee-line, and that's the way we know how to find 'em."

"Shall we go on and find them, then?"

"Not yet. Wait till a few more light on the honey. I want you to watch 'em, so's you kin know fur sartin how the thing works."

Two more bees lighted on the box, secured their loads of honey, and flew off in exactly the same direction that was taken by the first.

"Now we've got the line, and no mistake about it," said Joe, as he examined his compass.

He closed the box, and put it in his pocket, took up his compass, and started off, closely followed by George.

The squatter's eye was true enough to enable him to follow the course taken by the bees very nearly, and he suffered nothing to cause him to deviate from it, sighting from one tree to another, and keeping his attention entirely fixed upon his aim.

When he came to an obstruction, he passed around it, set down his compass, let the needle come to a rest, and again took up the course upon which he had started.

In spite of these delays, they traveled at a pretty rapid pace.

"Do you really mean to say," asked George, "that you can follow that bee-line so closely as to come to the tree where the bees hide their honey?"

"Wal, Jawge, I allow that I kin foller the line nigh as straight as the bee made it."

"But the tree may be miles from here, and we may miss it as we go."

"That's all so; but we kin on'y do our best. Ef we do miss it, we must try ag'in, and keep on tryin'. This is a business that needs a heap o' patience."

"I believe you. It seems to me to be about the same as looking for a needle in a haystack."

"But the needie kin be found, Jawge, ef it's thar."

Their course led them to the river, and they descended the steep bluff, forded the stream, and reached the bottom land on the other side.

"We must be nigh about the place now," said Joe, as he examined his compass, and took a fresh start. "Thar's lots o' gum trees in this bottom, and it's in the holler gums that the bees like to lay up thar honey. Keep yer eyes peeled now, Jawge, and watch all the trees, to see if bees are flyin' into any o' 'em."

George used his eyes as well as he could, but saw no indication of a bee-tree. He said, on the contrary, that he thought he had seen several bees going in another direction.

Joe came to a halt, and set down his compass. After observing the indications carefully, he concluded that they must have gone out of their course, or passed the tree they were seeking.

It was necessary to attract another bee, and to get a new course, and the honey was opened and watched.

They did not have to wait long for a bee, and when he rose and flew away his flight was eagerly watched.

"Jesso," remarked the squatter. "We've come a leetle outen the way, and hev gone by the tree. So we must take the back track. But the gum must be nigh hand, or we've got to cross the river ag'in, and that 'ud be bad."

He took up the compass, and the two hunters started on the new course, carefully examining the trees as they went.

They reached the river without finding any bee-tree, and Joe Scurly's countenance fell.

Not only would they have to cross the river again, but right before them on the opposite side rose a bluff, some fifty feet high, of solid limestone, without a break or a tree or a bush, which they could not hope to climb.

"This is wot mought be called a stumper," said Joe. "Ef we could fly as the bees fly, it would be an easy job; but thar ain't the man livin' as could climb that bluff and foller a straight course."

"What can we do about it?" asked George, who was getting tired of this seemingly endless search.

"Wal, Jawge, thar's a big pile o' honey in these woods, and we must git it. Jest now I am gwine to sight onto a tree on top o' the bluff, and then go around and take a fresh start from that tree. Lemme see, now, wot tree 'll the course strike?"

He glanced at his compass, and then looked up at the top of the bluff.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise and joy.

"Jawge! Oh, Jawge! Look thar! Look up thar!"

George looked eagerly, but did not know

what his friend meant until it was pointed out to him.

Then he saw a number of bees flying in and out of a hole in the rock, a little more than half way up the bluff.

"That's it, Jawge!" exclaimed the squatter. "That's the bee-tree we've been huntin', and it ain't a tree at all, but a bluff. Thar cain't be a bit o' doubt that the bees hev got a big settlement in that hole, and thar's nothin' short o' whole oodles o' honey in the rock, outen the way o' varmints and everythin'."

"How are we going to get at it, then?"

"I told yer, Jawge, that this bee-huntin' business takes a heap o' patience; but we've struck the biggest find, and struck it the easiest, of anythin' I ever see or heard of. How are we gwine to git at it? Why, Jawge, we will go home—thar ain't no use o' markin' that tree, as nobody else is gwine to find it afore we git back—and in the mornin' we'll come over yer with a wagon, and tubs, and kittles, and a rope, and we'll make a ladder, and we'll kerry home sech a load o' honey as'll make the folks open the'r eyes."

The precise spot was carefully located, so that the hunters might easily find it on their return, and they went home.

Early the next morning they set out, with George's wagon loaded with so many tubs and buckets and tin pails, that Mrs. Denston suggested that they must have found a honey-mine.

"That's jest wot we've been doin', mum," replied Joe Scurl. "'Tain't nothin' short o' that, ef I know bees."

Ben, who was greatly excited by the honey find, was allowed to accompany them, and they crossed the river at the usual wagon ford. Then they meandered along through the bottom, cutting a way for the team where it was necessary to do so, and finally reached the river at a point opposite the bluff in which the bees had made their home.

They cut down a tall white-oak sapling, trimmed its branches for a part of their ladder, and made the rest by driving stout pins into holes bored in the trunk. This they carried across the stream, and set it up against the bluff, and Joe prepared to mount to the hive.

"The bees will sting you to death," said George.

"No, they won't. I reckon I know bees, and I'll soon settle that part o' the business."

The squatter did understand bees, and proved his ability to rob their hives by smoking them out in short order.

When he got into the crevice where they had stored their sweets, he fairly screamed with delight.

The size of the find far surpassed his expectations, and he hastened to tear off the masses of comb and to let them down in a bucket to Ben, who passed the bucket to George, who waded the stream and emptied them into the tubs in the wagon.

They filled all the vessels they had brought, and left some honey in the rock, as Joe said, "fur the bees to start housekeepin' ag'in."

It was near night when they got home, and the astonishment of George's mother and sister

was immense. They not only opened their eyes to the widest extent, but kept them open, and were so bewildered that they could hardly be persuaded to help take care of the load.

As for Joe Scurl, he seemed hardly to know whether he stood on his head or his feet, and he was continually breaking out in new raptures.

Such a honey find, he said, had never been heard of in that region, and it would be talked about as long as Rackensack kept her head above water.

The next day, after reserving a sufficient quantity for home consumption, he and George drove twenty miles to sell their honey, and the journey was a continual jollification for Joe Scurl. He received money enough to keep him in idleness for a long time, and George Denston's share was more than acceptable to his family.

CHAPTER X.

THE TURKEY SHOOT.

AMONG the few sports and pastimes with which the Christmas season was celebrated in the backwoods was a "turkey shoot."

The person who furnished this amusement for the settlement was a free black man named Aaron Wipes, to whom Christmas always brought quite a harvest.

During the rest of the year he raised turkeys, which he set up to be shot at on Christmas Day at "two bits," or twenty-five cents, a shot, the conditions of the match being that the shooting should be with rifles, off-hand, and that the turkeys should be shot in the head. If a fowl was killed by being hit in any other part of the body, it reverted to Aaron.

It may be supposed that such prices and terms would make Aaron's turkey-shoots quite profitable to him; but the truth is that the men of the settlement, young and old, were such close shots that turkeys' heads were not safe before the muzzles of their rifles, and the old darky's gains were seldom what he would wish them to be.

There were some marksmen of the neighborhood whom he specially dreaded, and among them was George Denston.

This was a late thing, as George was a newcomer, and had only recently gained reputation as a good shot; but he had shown such skill in the use of the rifle as had already made him renowned.

Finding himself in a country where game was abundant and worth the killing, he had devoted all his spare time to hunting, and it was not long before he surpassed Joe Scurl in the art of which the squatter considered himself a master.

He could call up a wild turkey in the woods until it came within range of his unerring rifle, and when he drew a bead on such game he always aimed at the head. Indeed, he would have considered it worse than a miss to hit any kind of game in the body, unless it should be some such beast as a panther or a bear.

A large part of the living of the Denston family was procured by George's rifle, and in shooting at a mark he soon outranked all the young men of the settlement.

Thus it was not surprising that when George Denston made his appearance at the turkey-

shoot, and proposed to compete for the prizes, Aaron protested pretty vigorously.

"Dis yer ain't gwine to do at all," said he. "Ef you's got a notion ob shootin' in dis yer turkey shoot, Marse Jawge, I'll hab to cha'ge yer fo' bits a shot."

"Why do you double the price on me, Aaron?" asked the young man.

"'Cause Ise hearn tell ob you, Marse Jawge, and I knows all 'bout yer shootin', an' you cain't shoot no turkeys yer, 'thout you put up fo' bits a shot."

"That is rather hard on me, Aaron; but I don't want to rob you, and I will try a couple of turkeys at that price."

The first bird set up for George was a stalwart gobbler, which Aaron tied to the stake, grumbling as he did so. He tied the turkey loosely, so as to give him rather more play than was really fair for the marksman, and against this trick the bystanders protested.

"Reckon de ole nigga has got to hab a show fur his turkey," grumbled Aaron. "'Spect I know what sawt o' shootin' is gwine on around yer."

He took his stand near the turkey, and gave it some fatherly advice.

"Now, yer durned ole fool gobbler, keep yer eyes peeled! Don't yer see it's dat Jawge Denston dat's gwine ter shoot? Wot yer squattin' like dat fur? Git up and stir around, or off goes yer ole head. Waggle about, turkey! Waggle about, now, 'cause he's drawin' a bead on yer!"

George Denston smiled as he raised his rifle, and he took a careful aim, while old Aaron's face assumed an agonized expression.

The rifle cracked, the gobbler's head was shattered, and he fluttered about the stake until he gave up the ghost.

"Jest look at dat!" exclaimed Aaron, as he picked up the bird. "On'y fo' bits fur de biggest kind ob a turkey!"

As if to save himself from utter ruin, he tied a hen turkey to the stake, but made no attempt to avert the fate of the bird, seating himself on the ground with an air of sorrowful resignation.

Again George Denston's unerring rifle cracked, and the hen turkey lost her head.

"Dat settles it," said Aaron. "You don't shoot no mo' turkeys away f'om dis chile, Jawge Denston. You's done broke me all up in business dis mawnin'."

"I don't think you need to worry, Aaron," said George, laughing. "You have not lost much by me, and some of the others will make it up to you."

As the young man was tying up his birds for the purpose of carrying them home, he was surrounded and complimented by a group of settlers, among whom was Silas Bradley, a well-to-do farmer, who was noted for his size, and especially for his large hands and feet.

"We don't mean to let you off so easy as that, Denston," said Bigfoot Bradley. "You are on exhibition to-day, my boy, and you have done some tall shootin'; but you've got to show us the best you can do, before we let you off."

"Anything to please the crowd," replied

George. "I don't think my shooting is much to brag of; but I am always ready to do my best."

Bradley took from his left hand a solid gold ring, with a heavy bloodstone setting. It was a large ring, such as his big finger required.

"I am going to set up this ring, Denston," said he, "and I shall want you to send a bullet through it."

George examined his ring and gauged it by one of the rifle bullets, which passed through it with plenty of room to spare.

"That is a little too much, Mr. Bradley," he said, as he handed it back. "I might hit the ring; but hitting it would be sure to spoil it."

"I don't want you to hit it, my boy, but to shoot through it. I will tell you what I will do. If you spoil the ring, you shall give me five dollars for it, and it is well worth ten. If you send a bullet clean through it, the ring is yours. Come, now; I believe you can do it, and we all want to see some fine shootin'."

George said that he could not expect to perform the feat, but was willing to attempt it, if he could shoot from a rest that would bring his rifle on a level with the ring when it was placed in position.

This was agreed to, and Bradley drove a "stub" into the ground, upon which he placed the ring, with the bloodstone as a base. Behind the "stub" he fastened a dark piece of board, to give a background for the ring, and to mark where the bullet should strike.

The young marksman drove a forked stake into the ground until the crotch was on a level with the ring. Then he carefully loaded his rifle and knelt down to his work.

Bets had been freely made on the shot; but the odds were largely against Denston's success. When he prepared to shoot, all the talk ceased, and the bystanders watched him in perfect silence.

After assuming as solid and comfortable a position as possible, he carefully sighted along his rifle and fired.

The board was seen to quiver, but the ring did not move.

"A clear miss!" shouted more than one, and all the party ran to the target.

"It can hardly be that," said George, as he rose and followed them.

He found them standing about the "stub," staring at the ring and the board behind it.

"The ring is yours, Denston," said Bigfoot Bradley, as he pointed out the bullet-hole in the board, just behind the golden circle.

It was clear that the bullet had passed through the ring without touching it, and the feat was hailed as the most remarkable that had been seen in that region.

Wide-awake George was thereafter acknowledged as the champion rifle-shot of the settlement.

CHAPTER XL

BURNED OUT.

THE second winter in the new settlement was a peculiarly hard one for that climate, and it was noted in the history of the Denston family because of a calamity that befell them.

To explain this calamity it is necessary to give a few particulars concerning the construction of a log cabin.

The log cabin built by George Denston comprised, as has been said, but one room and a loft, and at one end of the main room was a fireplace, to which was attached a "stick and clay" chimney. This sort of an erection needs to be briefly described.

In the middle of one side of the house a space six feet square is cut out of the logs, reaching down to the floor. Split logs are driven or dove-tailed into the cut logs, and these are fastened to other timbers at the back of the fireplace, making a stout crib extending to the height of the cut space. Of course it is built on the outside of the house.

The crib is well "chinked," and is gradually narrowed in with smaller timber, until it is finished by laying short and flat sticks upon each other, cob house fashion. This structure is extended a little above the point of the roof, and mud is thickly plastered on the inside as it is carried up.

The bottom of the crib is fitted in with earth, tightly packed and pounded, to the level of the floor, and the back and sides of the fireplace are made of moist clay, packed and pounded in a temporary frame, which is to be burned off when the first fire is built, and thus the "stick-and clay" chimney is completed.

Such a structure is by no means ornamental, nor can it be considered entirely safe. In fact, it is liable to be dangerous, as the Denstons discovered to their cost before the winter was over.

During the cold weather George was accustomed to roll in immense back logs, as big as he and Ben could manage, against which the fire was built, and such a log usually lasted two or three days.

These fires kept the log-cabin warm and comfortable enough; but, when the blaze roared up the wooden chimney, the Denstons confessed that it looked like a dangerous arrangement. At night the embers were banked up with ashes, and then they felt safe.

But it was at night that the calamity occurred, and at the darkest hour of the night, just before day.

George was aroused at a very early hour by a bright light that came through the chinks of the loft.

"Get up, Ben!" he exclaimed. "Here it is broad daylight. We will be terribly behind with our work."

He jumped out of bed, dressed himself speedily, and hastened down-stairs. His mother and sister were not up, and there were no signs of daylight in the main room.

He stepped out of doors, and saw that it was yet night and very dark. But there was a strange light in the air, coming from the westward, and he heard a peculiar hissing and crackling noise that at once suggested the thought of fire.

Running around to the other end of the house, he at once saw what was the matter. The wooden chimney was on fire.

The light upper part was in a bright blaze, and the logs of the lower part were in places nearly burned off. The fire had worked its way

through a crack in the earthen back of the fireplace, and had probably been smoldering for several days before it broke out.

When it was discovered it was a bad case of fire. The chimney was long past saving, the weather-boarding at the gable end of the house had caught, the roof was in flames, and a strong wind was blowing the fire into the dry logs.

George saw that the case was hopeless, or nearly so, and ran around to warn the family.

He met Ben coming out of the door, told him what was the matter, and went in to break the news to his mother and sister, who were of course greatly frightened and confused.

"I will go and see what I can do," said he; "but I think the house is a goner, and you may as well lift out such things as you can easily carry. Take the matter easy, as we will have time enough to save everything."

The coolness of his words and manner reassured them, and they dressed themselves and went to work.

George returned to the other end of the house, where he found Ben staring helplessly at the flames.

As there was no fire-engine or hook and ladder truck within some hundreds of miles, there was little to be done with the fire but to let it burn. The chimney might be knocked over, and there was water enough to quench the flames in the crib; but the upper part of the house was beyond saving, and the logs were beginning to burn. At the best, the house would have to be rebuilt, and it might as well be let alone.

So George and Ben applied themselves to the task of saving the household property.

Mrs. Denston and Lucy were busily at work, and the boys, beginning at the loft, soon cleared the house of its contents, which were neither valuable nor numerous. They even saved from the burning building the doors and most of the planking.

It was broad daylight when they had done all they could do, or cared to do, and George mounted his mother and sister on his two horses, and sent them to Abe Lassiter's in charge of Ben, while he remained to watch the property.

After a time Ben came to replace him, and he rode over to Lassiter's for breakfast.

That faithful friend had already assured the family of a home at his house until they could settle themselves again, and was hitching up his team to bring over their household goods.

But Mrs. Denston and Lucy were very despondent. The destruction of a home was a terrible thing to them, even if it was nothing better than a log cabin, and George found them in tears.

"What on earth are you two crying about?" he asked. "I think you ought to cheer up, as there is nothing to trouble you."

"Nothing to trouble us, when we have been burned out of house and home?" replied Mrs. Denston.

"Nothing at all. Why, mother, that is a piece of good luck."

"Good luck? When our house is burned? What can you mean?"

"The truth is, mother, that I made a great mistake in building that house. It was only a

temporary concern, you know—a mere make-shift—and I had set it just where I wanted to build a real house when I could. I don't know how we would have got rid of the shanty, if it hadn't burned down. Now you shall have a nice, comfortable, and respectable house, and there shall be no stick and clay chimney hitched to it, either. I am going right out into the woods to cut the logs."

"That's the way to talk, my boy!" exclaimed Abe Lassiter. "You are just the stuff for the backwoods, and those who help themselves always get help. Take Ben with you when you go to cut the logs, and I will see to bringing your things over."

"Thank you, sir. The house could not have gone at a better time of the year."

George soon had a new lot of logs cut, and employed two men to hew and square them, and the whole neighborhood not only came to the raising, but assisted him in many ways.

With the money he had gained by the honey-find he bought lumber and hardware, doors and windows, and before spring opened he had a good and substantial double log house, almost handsome to look at, with a stout stone chimney at each end.

He had gone in debt to a small amount; but his creditors had not the least fear of losing anything by Wide-awake George.

When Mrs. Denston and Lucy were brought into the new house, they were more than satisfied, and agreed with George that their calamity had been a blessing which was very thinly disguised.

CHAPTER XII.

A RAID OF HORSE-THIEVES.

SCARCELY had George Denston got his family moved into the new house, and preparations made for his spring work, when he missed another horse.

It was not Molly this time, as she was out in what George called his woods pasture with the colt, but the sorrel horse, which was missing from the stable near the house, and had doubtless been stolen.

The young settler, full of honest wrath, hastened to get Molly, and rode over to Abe Lassiter's to consult the oracle.

He found Abe more wrathful than himself. In fact, he was in a towering passion, and was scattering the strongest kind of language about promiscuously.

He had lost his two best horses, and was sure that they had been stolen.

While the two friends were commenting forcibly upon the meanness of horse-thieves, and the necessity of making an example, another neighbor rode up and announced that two of his horses had been taken.

These three sufferers at once organized themselves into a vigilance committee, and proceeded to arouse and enlist the settlers, for the purpose of pursuing the thieves, recovering the stolen property, and doing justice, generally.

They found plenty to join them, as horse-stealing was a blow at the entire community, and all felt the necessity of doing something that would make an end of it, at least for a time.

"It is too durned bad," said Bert Runnells, "that we should ha' kep' our critters on corn all through the hard winter, jest to hev 'em run off by sech scamps in the spring."

Among those who joined the party was Bill Anderson, who lived a few miles beyond Runnells, and who had also lost a horse.

It was evident that the raid had been made on a large scale, by an organized band of depredators, and that the capture of the horse-thieves was not to be an easy task.

The indignant settlers were well-armed, and mounted on the best horses that were left in the neighborhood, and Abe Lassiter had added to his equipment a coil of rope, light, but strong, which was intended for a purpose that everybody could guess at.

Before starting they held a council of war, to choose a leader, and to decide the course they should take.

Abe Lassiter was at once chosen as captain of the party; but there were different views of the best route to be pursued, the majority being in favor of following the tracks of the horse-thieves, which were plain enough in the road by which they had left the settlement.

But a stern chase is a long chase, on the land as well as on the sea, and it was known that the scoundrels had a good start.

George Denston, who had a lively recollection of the theft of his mare Molly, proposed that they should first visit Tom Mabry, and this suggestion was favorably received by Captain Lassiter.

"I don't believe that Tom took a hand in this game," said Abe. "We all know that he ain't much above that sort of thing; but this is a touch beyond anything he would be likely to take hold of. But he has ideas on the subject of horse-stealing, and I believe that he can help us out if he will. So I vote that we look up Tom Mabry."

This opinion finally prevailed, and they set out to find Tom Mabry.

On the road they fell in with another wrathful farmer, who had also lost a horse, and who joined the party, which then numbered a dozen able and resolute men, among whom George Denston did not count as the least.

To the surprise of all they found Tom Mabry at home; but their wonder was lessened when they saw in his cabin a dark-complexioned woman, evidently a half-breed from the Indian Territory.

"So thar's been horse-thieves about, and you're huntin' hosses?" said he, when Abe Lassiter had briefly explained the purpose of the expedition. "Ef you've come arter me, you're whistlin' fur the wrong pup, 'cause I ain't in that line o' business. See my wife, thar? Wal, I married her t'other day, and I've settled down, and am gwine to farmin'. Ef I war arter stealin' hosses, I wouldn't take 'em from my neighbors and old friends."

"I believe you, Tom," said Lassiter. "None of us supposed that you were in this thing; but we thought that you might help us if you would, and we are willing to pay you well to do so."

"All right. Tell me all about it, and I will do what I kin."

Tom Mabry's face darkened as the story was told to him.

"It's a big job that you've got holt of," said he. "I make no doubt that Sam Brenner's gang, from over the line, has done the work, and they're a hull team and no mistake. But it's easy enough to tell whar they kem from, and whar they went to. They've jest circled through the settlement. Fust they went up the road nigh yer, and stopped at Wills's, and next at Denston's. Then they took the big road to Lassiter's, and then crossed down by Runnells's and Anderson's, and so they went out. You've saved time by comin' yer, 'cause they'll hev to circle around to git into the Stringville road ag'in, and thar's a chance to head 'em off by takin' a short cut."

"Will you guide us and help us catch them?" asked Lassiter.

"Durned ef I don't. I've got a grudge ag'inst Sam Brenner, anyhow, and would be right glad to see that gang cleaned out."

Guided by Tom Mabry, the party passed through forest roads and bridle-paths, until they came out on the Stringville road, at the point which the guide had wished to strike.

Most of the men jumped off to examine the road; but it was plain that the party they were pursuing had passed that point, as fresh tracks were abundant, and those who were accustomed to reading tracks recognized them as the same they had seen near the places from which the horses had been stolen.

"As we missed headin' 'em off," said Tom Mabry, "we kin try to chase 'em down, and I don't reckon they've got much the start of us."

The party pushed forward at a rapid rate, getting as much speed out of their horses as they dared to, and it was near sunset when they came in sight of the horse-thieves, who were four in number, and well mounted, but were incumbered by the horses they were leading.

"Now for it!" exclaimed Abe Lassiter, as he pressed his horse to a run.

At the same time the horse-thieves discovered their pursuers, and hastened to get out of their way.

The locality in which they were sighted was a wild and entirely unsettled region, thickly covered with a heavy growth of timber, and abounding in dangerous swamps. They discovered the pursuit just as they were entering a wide swamp which was crossed by a corduroy road.

When the pursuers came to the swamp, they saw that a sharp trick had been played to baffle them. The horse-thieves had halted, had torn up the logs that composed the road-bed, and had piled them on their side of the gap.

From behind the fortification thus constructed they safely opened fire upon Lassiter's party, who could only approach them in a mass over the corduroy.

"This is a bad piece of business," said the leader. "What do you think of it, Mabry?"

"I reckon thar hosses is tired," replied the guide, "as they've covered a good deal o' ground since they set out. They've got fresh 'uns, to

be sure, but are afeared you mought overhaul 'em. So they allow to hold us off until night, and then slip away."

"Is there no way to work through the swamp and get around them?"

"Wal, thar's a sort of a way, and I kin lead any fellers through as is willin' to foller, ef thar's enough daylight left to make it."

"Count me in," said George Denston, and several others volunteered.

It was arranged that all should dismount, and that the main body of the party should get such shelter as they could and keep up an attack on the horse-thieves, while Tom Mabry, with Abe Lassiter, George Denston and Bill Anderson, should try to work through the swamp and get in their rear.

The party of four had a hard road to travel. That is to say, though it was soft enough, and a good deal too soft, it was a very difficult road.

It was not even a ridge of any sort, but a succession of hummocks, roots and cypress knobs slippery and uncertain, surrounded by the dark and slimy water in which moccasin snakes were by no means scarce.

But they pushed on bravely, admonished by the growing darkness that they had no time to lose, and knowing that if they should get caught in that swamp, they could not attempt to get out before morning.

Next to Tom Mabry, George Denston made the best and easiest time. Young and light and active, he leaped from one foothold to another, never losing his balance, while Anderson was twice soused in the swamp, and Lassiter's weight frequently caused him to sink to his knees.

They pulled through finally, not a minute too soon, and had good cause to congratulate themselves when they struck the corduroy.

It was then too dark to see anything clearly; but they heard occasional shots up the road, which told them that the horse-thieves were still there, and enabled them to judge of their distance from the gap.

Abe Lassiter then took the lead of the four, and they passed silently and stealthily up the road, until they came in sight of the stolen horses, which were hitched and lumped on the corduroy, in charge of one of the thieves.

"Sh-sh-sh!" whispered Mabry. "That is Sam Bremner himself. I know him by the coonskin tail to his cap. Watch me while I slip up on him."

Under cover of the horses, he stole up the road, closely followed by the other three.

Sam Bremner rose to his feet.

"We are all right now, boys," said he. "It is gettin' to be as dark as a stack o' black cats, and we mought as well git on our critters and ride off."

"All right, Sam!" replied a voice from the log-heap. "We will give 'em a shot or two, and then scatter."

"Be quick about it, then."

The words were hardly out of Bremner's mouth when Tom Mabry leaped upon him, tripped him, and threw him on the road.

He yelled as he was seized, and the other horse-thieves turned and found themselves confronted by foes from an unexpected quarter.

They knew that they could expect no mercy if they were captured, and, of course, were ready to fight desperately for their lives; while the others knew that their friends could not get to them across the gap, and that they must put their work in vigorously and surely.

But Lassiter and his comrades had the advantage of being prepared for the conflict, and their three rifles cracked as Sam Brenner fell.

Then they drew their pistols, and ran in to make an end of the job.

The horse-thieves, surprised and taken off their guard, were scarcely able to defend themselves, and in a few seconds three dead bodies lay on the corduroy.

George Denston was not certain whether he had actually killed a man or not, but gave himself the benefit of the doubt, though he knew his aim to be deadly.

Abe Lassiter hastened to the assistance of Mabry, who was struggling with Sam Brenner, and the leader of the horse-thieves was soon securely bound.

The only casualty on the part of the settlers was that of Bill Anderson, always unlucky, who had been shot in the arm.

The others proceeded to restore the logs to the road-bed, so that their friends could join them. Then the bodies and the prisoner were taken to the land.

But they were not taken far.

Captain Lassiter's rope was brought into use, and Sam Brenner was soon swinging by the neck from the limb of a tree. Then the bodies of his comrades were strung up near him.

When George Denston got home he was glad that he had recovered his horse, but thought that he would rather lose several horses than witness another such scene.

CHAPTER XIII.

A WILD MAN OF THE WOODS.

ABOUT the middle of the summer reports began to be current in the neighborhood of a strange, nondescript creature that was occasionally seen in the woods.

It had appeared to some children on their way to the log school-house, and had frightened them so terribly that their parents kept them at home.

At least one man was also reported to have seen it; but accounts of its size and appearance varied so greatly that no opinion of what it really was could be formed, though all agreed in representing it as a horrible creature, covered with hair, and with eyes that blazed like fire.

As it could not be doubted that there was something of the kind in the neighborhood, the wiser heads settled down to the belief that it was a wild beast that had escaped from some menagerie up the country.

One day Ben Denston went into the woods to look for a stray "yearling," and he came home with a strange story of an encounter with the nondescript monster.

George, who did not believe the tales he had heard, was inclined to laugh at him; but Ben earnestly declared that he had not only seen the thing, but had been quite close to it.

He had come upon it unawares, as it was feed-

ing on some berries that grew on the bushes, and he could not have been more than two rods from it when he saw it.

The creature seemed to catch sight of him at the same moment. It growled, chattered, uttered a strange cry and moved off on its four feet.

Ben was strongly inclined to run; but, as the thing made no attempt to pursue him, he plucked up courage and advanced toward it.

Suddenly it rose up on its hind feet and bounded away into the woods, going, as Ben said, "like greased lightning."

"It must be some big ape that has got loose," said George. "Was it very hairy, Ben? Did you see its eyes? What did it look like, anyhow?"

"The sober truth is, George, that it looked more like a man than anything else. Its face was like a man's—what I could see of it—and it had very long hair and beard, and what seemed to be hair on its body may have been more dirt than hair, and I am almost sure that it had something in the shape of clothes."

"That's it!" exclaimed George. "It is a wild man—some poor lunatic that is no better than a beast. I have read of such things."

Mrs. Denston and Lucy were greatly shocked and terrified by Ben's story. They declared that they would not dare to venture out of the house while such a creature was roaming the woods, and even insisted upon keeping the doors locked and the windows barricaded.

George rode over to Abe Lassiter's, to whom he told Ben's story, and Abe proposed that there should be a hunt for the wild man, or beast, or whatever it was.

It was an easy thing to get up a party for that purpose, and a number of the settlers, mounted and armed, met at the Denston place the next morning.

Ben Denston, who was then nearly seventeen years of age, carried George's rifle, while the latter contented himself with his two derringer pistols. He also carried a lasso, which had been given to him by a Texas traveler, and with which he had practiced until he was quite expert in its use.

Ben led the party to the place where he had seen the creature, and they separated and began to search for it.

The search continued for hours, covering a large extent of forest, but nothing was seen of the nondescript.

At last George sighted it, sounded the alarm and gave chase, all who were near him joining in the pursuit.

But the creature bounded away on two legs with such tremendous strides, taking to the most difficult and inaccessible parts of the woods, that it kept far ahead of the mounted men, and a shot that was sent after it only increased its speed.

Some of them got near enough to form the opinion that it was a man, as it ran like a man, and had hair like a man's, and they thought that they could distinguish some rags of clothing.

Finally it disappeared in a glade, a partly open space in the forest, and the disappearance was so sudden and complete that some of the

party began to believe that there must be something supernatural about it.

But a large hollow oak, with an opening at the base, soon attracted their attention, and it was the general opinion that the creature had taken refuge in the trunk of the tree.

How to get it out, or get at it, was the next question.

George Denston, who was then strongly impressed with the belief that the nondescript was a man, begged that nobody would shoot at it, as he wished to try to capture it with his lasso, if it could be induced to come out, and he was told that he should have a chance to try his skill.

Abe Lassiter went behind the tree, and beat on the hollow trunk with a heavy stick.

Suddenly the creature bounded out, in the sight of the entire party, and a horrible thing it was to look at.

George Denston stood firm, and swung his lasso quickly, but with good aim.

The noose settled down over the wild man's head, and tightened around his waist; but it failed to secure his arms, as they were withdrawn from its clutch with wonderful quickness.

Then the monster, crazy with rage or fear, played the game that is sometimes practiced by bears when they are lassoed, but played it far more briskly than any bear would have done.

Seizing the rope with both hands, and hauling it in as he went, he advanced upon his captor with lightning leaps, and before George knew what he was about he was thrown to the ground, and the creature fastened his teeth in his shoulder.

He bit like a dog, snarling horribly, and clasped the throat of his victim with one of his hard and sinewy hands.

George Denston strove in vain to free himself from that hateful gripe. The grasp upon his throat tightened, and he felt that his breath was leaving him, when he was nearly deafened by a shot that was fired close to his ear.

The limbs of the monster trembled convulsively, his grasp loosened, and he rolled over, dead.

When George looked up, he saw Abe Lassiter standing by him, with a pistol in his hand.

"I had to shoot him, George," said he. "It was the only way of saving your life. I reckon you had better not tackle such a critter with a rope again. He was worse than a wild beast."

It was seen that the creature was a man, though there was scarcely anything that was human in his features, and Ben Denston's description of him had been a good one. There could be no doubt that he was a lunatic of the worst kind, and that the neighborhood was well rid of the terror.

George Denston, who was badly scratched and bitten, went home with Lassiter, and had his lacerated shoulder roughly cauterized before he returned to his mother and sister.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FOREST FIRE.

THE third summer of the Denston family in their new home had opened brightly and prosperously, and they had good reason to believe

that the year would give them a handsome return for their hard labor.

But the latter part of the summer told quite a different story. It was distinguished by such a "dry spell" as had never before been experienced, and which passed into the history of the region as the big drouth.

It extended into the early part of the autumn. Crops were withered in the fields, all vegetation was parched, cisterns were emptied without any prospect of filling them, the few wells in the settlement went dry, and the river was so low that in places it could be crossed dry shod.

Several families moved out of the neighborhood, and the winter prospect for those who remained was a dreary one.

The Denstons suffered with the rest, though, thanks to George's forethought, a piece of bottom land which had formerly been too wet to use was planted with corn, and promised them at least a partial crop.

When the cistern threatened exhaustion, he set at work to dig a well in a spot indicated by Joe Scurl, who claimed to be a "water witch." George had never dug a well, but his experience in digging a cistern had taught him how to go to work, and with Ben's help he made rapid progress. At the depth of thirty feet from the surface he struck a vein of water, which boiled up so rapidly and plentifully that he had to make haste to get out of its way. So the water problem was solved, to the great joy of the family.

But the chief trouble and danger arose from forest fires. Nobody knew how they originated; but the ground was so parched, the foliage so withered, and the timber so dry, that the least spark was sure to start such a conflagration as could not be easily extinguished.

While these fires were raging, the settlers joined their forces to assist each other at the points which were the worst threatened, and by constant vigilance and hard work they succeeded in preventing any serious destruction of property outside of the nearly worthless crops.

But it was impossible to put a stop to the fires. If they were cut off at one place, they took a start in another direction, and every now and then they would break out afresh in unexpected spots, or a breeze would send a dangerous conflagration sweeping through the forest.

Thus the settlers were continually on the watch, and continually at work, until they were nearly worn out by their constant exertions.

One morning there was an alarm from the place of unlucky Bill Anderson, and George Denston mounted Molly, and rode over there to help fight the fire.

The neighbors worked hard all day, and had the satisfaction of knowing that they had saved the farm buildings and nearly everything of value.

It was after sunset when George left Anderson's and he was within about half a mile of his home when a bright light suddenly broke out before him.

He looked along the lonely forest road, and saw that the woods were on fire on both sides of it. As he approached the spot the conflagration increased, and became terrible in its grandeur.

A fire had started in the woods toward the west, and a brisk wind had risen, which was carrying the devouring element in a swift and steady march across the little road and in the direction of the home of the Denstons.

The brush and leaves were everywhere burning and roaring, the flames were licking up the foliage and crackling among the twigs and limbs of the trees, and the fire was gaining strength and speed with every moment.

The young man halted an instant, but only an instant.

His home was threatened, and he must reach it as soon as possible. It was useless to think of passing around the conflagration or trying to head it off. There was but one course to take, and that was to keep to the road and run the gantlet of the flames.

He tied his handkerchief over his mouth, pulled down his hat, and urged Molly forward.

The mare objected and resisted; but he struck her flank fiercely with his hickory switch, and startled her so that she dashed into the flames.

When she was once in she could do nothing but go on, and she flew down the forest road, maddened by fear, at the top of her speed.

George felt the flames scorching his hands and face, and the smoke nearly blinded and choked him; but he held his head down, and trusted to the mare to pull him through. A blazing sapling dropped across the road before her, and she bounded over it. A large tree fell with a crash behind her, and startled her into yet more frantic efforts.

Fortunately the lane of fire was not a broad one. Though the headlong course of horse and rider was hot and dangerous, it was brief and soon over.

The belt of fire was passed, and Molly dashed through the lowered bars into the inclosure around the house, where Mrs. Denston and Lucy and Ben were huddled together, watching the progress of the conflagration.

George sprung to the ground, and went to work at once to ward off the threatened disaster.

But Ben had not contented himself with standing still and watching the fire. He had brought into the house inclosure all the stock that could be got together, and that much at least was safe, if the house could be saved.

The house stood in a small clearing surrounded by the tall trees of a heavy and virgin forest, and was connected with the forest by fencing and other obstructions that would carry fire.

The first thing necessary was to remove all those obstructions, and put them out of the way of the flames.

George set the others at that work, while he got together all the blankets and quilts in the house, soaked them in water from the well, and, with the aid of a ladder, spread them on the roof. Then a couple of trees that stood too near the house quickly fell before the strokes of his ax.

By this time most of the fencing and other light stuff in the inclosure had been removed to the leeward side of the house. By this time, too, the fire had taken complete possession of the forest, was burning fiercely at the edge of the clearing, and was rapidly surrounding the inclosure.

There was nothing more that could be done, except to fight off the rivulets of fire that crept along the ground, and to keep the covering of the roof soaked with water.

The heat was then so great that George sent his mother and sister inside, while he and Ben sheltered themselves with the horses and cattle on the leeward side of the house, venturing out every now and then to wet the roof and to watch for flying cinders.

It was soon apparent that some of the buildings in the horse-lot, if not all of them, would have to go, and that it would be useless labor to try to save them.

The horse-lot was a smaller clearing than that around the house. It was surrounded by a high fence, and contained a stable with a large loft, a cattle-shed attached, a corn-crib, and a rude hen-house.

Ben proposed to go and save what he could in that quarter, before the fire cut him off, and dashed away, while George remained to guard the house.

The boy did his work quickly and well, taking from the stable everything he could get out, piling it in the middle of the lot, and hastily throwing earth upon the pile. But he had to break through a ring of fire to get back.

When he reached the house the forest all around the inclosure was in flames, and the scene was grand and awful.

The roaring of the conflagration was terrific; the tall trees seemed to sway and surge as they burst into masses of fire; volumes of smoke and flame rolled up to the sky and obscured the heavens; clouds of burning leaves and cinders swept over the house and dropped upon it; the air was so hot and close that breathing was painful; the horses trembled as they huddled against the house; the cattle crouched near them and moaned; the solitary clearing was girt with an ocean of fire.

George and Ben were enabled to breathe the stifling air by keeping wet cloths at their mouths, and through the long and weary night they did not relax their efforts, but kept the roof soaked and extinguished every spark that touched the house.

In the morning they were sure that their lives and home were safe, and the prospect was that the fire would soon cease for want of fuel.

But they were pitiable objects in the midst of a scene of gloom and desolation, George in particular being burned and scorched, nearly blinded, and completely overcome by fatigue.

At last they went into the house for needed food and rest, and the praise they received was unstinted.

"It is a great blessing that you had a well dug, George," said his mother.

"Yes, indeed. If it hadn't been for that, we might now be settled in another world. But the house and the stock are safe, and we have pulled through very well. The stable is gone, but the corn-crib stands with the corn in it, and that is a great comfort. We will have lots of rails to make, but the fire has made a big clearing for us, and that is a great saving of labor. I shall build a better stable, and Ben and I will set at work right away to repair damages."

"Not just yet, I think," remarked Lucy.

"Your hands and face are blistered, and your eyes seem to be nearly out. We will have to keep you in the house for awhile, whether or no."

CHAPTER XV.

THE YOUNG DEPUTY SHERIFF.

IN the fall of the year of "the big drought" there was an election, at which Abe Lassiter was elected sheriff of the county. It was an office which he had not coveted, and, as he was not well fitted for it by education, he made George Denston his deputy, engaging him to attend to the clerical duties of the position.

George found that the work allotted to him did not seriously interfere with his labors on the farm, and it brought in a little revenue that was sorely needed; so he was well pleased with his office.

Outside of his clerical duties the young deputy sheriff had little official work to do, until near the opening of spring, when he became involved in a matter that called for no little pluck and self-sacrifice.

An old man was found dead in his house, where he had been brutally and secretly murdered.

It was the first crime of the kind that had been known in the neighborhood. Men had been killed in rows, in fair fights, or shot down openly on the high road; but such a secret, midnight, shocking murder as this was something entirely new, and it caused a great sensation.

Reuben Draine, the murdered man, had lived alone with his two children, Thomas and Mary, a young man of twenty-four and a girl of nineteen.

He was fully sixty years of age, and was not well liked in the neighborhood, being of a harsh and morose disposition, unobliging, unsocial, and almost repulsive in his manners. Although he was the owner of a large and productive farm, he lived in a mean and stingy way, and it was probably his penuriousness that gained him the reputation of being a miser and of having plenty of gold and silver concealed in his log cabin.

It was generally believed, and with good reason for the belief, that he lived on very bad terms with his children; but there could hardly be a doubt that he was responsible for this state of affairs, as it was known that for years he had treated them both very severely.

It was pretty certain that they were not the kind of young people who were likely to keep a house in an uproar. Tom Draine was by no means strong-minded, and was regarded by some as little better than an idiot; while Mary was a sweet and gentle girl, whose amiable disposition made her generally liked.

But when Reuben Draine was murdered, there were plenty who believed that his children, having endured his hard and miserly rule as long as they could, had at last revolted and made an end of him.

The old man occupied one of the lower rooms of a double log house as his sleeping apartment, Mary using the other, and Tom sleeping upstairs in the room above his father.

Reuben Draine was murdered at night, and

Tom's story was that when he came down-stairs early in the morning he found his father dead in his bed, his head having been split open with an ax. He at once called Mary, who ran to the nearest neighbor's and gave the alarm.

The door of the room faced an open hall or passageway between the two parts of the house, and the old man always locked it when he went to bed; but Tom said that he found it open that morning. He had heard no noise during the night, and Mary, who was on the other side of the passageway, had heard none.

In a corner of the old man's room a piece of Tom's clothing was found, and it was stained with blood, looking as if bloody hands had been wiped on it. The ax with which the murder was committed, and which was found on the floor, was Tom's ax. He said that he had left it at the woodpile the previous evening.

On the strength of these suspicious circumstances Tom Draine was arrested, charged with the murder of his father. Mary was allowed to go free, as it was proposed to use her as a witness against her brother.

The prisoner had a hearing before Col. Welburn, Babe Welburn's father, who was a justice of the peace. All the neighbors were called in as witnesses, and the testimony was mainly directed to the unpleasant relations that had existed between Reuben Draine and his children.

Mary had a long and severe examination, under which she more than once broke down and burst into tears. She was compelled to make some admissions that were quite unfavorable to her brother, as it appeared that he had made threats against his father. But she had never paid any attention to them, as they were made under great provocation, and Tom was not strong in his head.

She could give no explanation of his bloody clothes, nor could she account for the presence of his ax in the house. But she was sure that Tom would never have harmed his father, and she could only suppose that the house had been entered at night by some stranger, who had murdered the old man for revenge, or for money.

To this theory was opposed the general belief that no stranger had been seen in the neighborhood about that time, that Reuben Draine had no enemies outside of his family, and that there was nothing to show that a theft had been committed or attempted.

Public opinion was strong against Tom Draine. It was believed that he was the only person who was likely to have killed his father, as well as the only one who had cause for wishing him out of the way, and he was committed to the log jail at the county town to await his trial.

This tragical case made George Denston, in the discharge of his duties as deputy sheriff, acquainted with Mary Draine. He then saw her for the first time, and sympathized with her, and admired her.

He admired her so much that he determined to do what he could for her, and he waited on her, after Tom was sent to jail, with offers of advice and assistance.

To these offers she responded very gratefully.

and was deeply touched by the kindness of the one friend who had been so unexpectedly sent to her.

"Yours are the only really kind words I have heard," said she. "Some people seem to speak kindly, but I can see that they suspect me as well as my brother. I am sure that poor Tom is innocent, and I believe that with your help he can be proved so. But the people have already made up their minds, and they will not listen to a word I say."

"What is it that you want to say?" asked George.

"Come here!" she eagerly replied, seizing her new friend by the arm, and leading him across the room. "Look at those marks on the bed-post."

On the post at the head of Reuben Draine's bed were the bloody marks of a left hand, with the exception of the third finger.

"The murderer's hand made that mark," said Mary, "and you see that the third finger was gone. There could have been no third finger, because no man ever seizes anything with his hand and leaves that finger up. If you will look at the ax, which somebody carried to Col. Welburn, you will see the same mark on the handle."

George said that he had already noticed it.

"Could Tom have been the murderer, then? He has all the fingers on both his hands. Now I have something more to show you."

She took him to the wood-pile, and showed him some tracks.

"It was just here that Tom left his ax," she said, "and here I found those tracks. No rain has fallen since that night, and they are quite clear and plain. Do they look like the tracks of my brother Tom?"

George admitted that they did not. One had been made by an ordinary boot; but the other was evidently the track of a foot so deformed that it might be called a club-foot.

The young deputy sheriff, who had become an adept in what may be called trackology, looked around and found other similar tracks.

"It is clear enough now," said he. "I must look for a man with a club-foot, who has lost the third finger of his left hand."

"There must be such a man," said Mary. "If you should find him, you may find some gold coins in his pockets. I don't know that he got any; but, if he did, they are marked. My father often told me that he marked his gold coins, so as to send Tom or me to prison if we took them. He showed me the mark, and this is it."

Mary Draine made a minute mark on a bit of paper, which George Denston folded and put in his pocket.

"Keep up your spirits, and hope for the best," said he. "I am going to find a man with a club-foot and a missing finger, and we will get Tom out of this scrape."

CHAPTER XVI.

CUTTING OUT A PRIZE.

GEORGE DENSTON immediately began to search for the man with a club-foot and a missing finger, and at first his search seemed much like the proverbial task of looking for a needle in a haystack.

No such man was living in the settlement, nor could any one remember having seen a man of that description in the neighborhood. The people generally had settled it in their minds that Tom Draine was guilty, and were not disposed to give any aid to an effort to prove his innocence.

But George was a persevering fellow, and his admiration for Mary Draine prompted him to leave no stone unturned in his attempt to clear her brother.

He learned that a man with a club-foot and a missing finger had been noted in the vicinity as a desperado and hard case in general. This was Jack Carter, who had been a member of Sam Brenner's band of horse-thieves before the raid that broke it up, and who had escaped the pursuit that was ended by the battle in the swamp.

Jack Carter had not been seen in the neighborhood since that event, but George was convinced that he had come back at least once, and had stayed long enough to murder Reuben Draine.

Having "spotted" his man, the next thing was to locate him, and this was no easy task. But he finally learned that Jack Carter had gone south, probably to join the remnant of Sam Brenner's band, who had emigrated to a place on the Texas border, a sort of predatory settlement or rendezvous, which was known as 'Thieves' Hollow.

George determined to pay a visit to Thieves' Hollow, and notified Mary Draine of his intention. She thanked him, with tears in her eyes, and said that she would pray for his safe return.

Abe Lassiter, the only other person to whom he spoke of his purpose, tried to dissuade him from going on such a dangerous errand.

Not only was Jack Carter a desperate man, said the sheriff, but his companions were all desperate men. No stranger's life could be safe among them, and they would make no bones at all of killing a man who came to capture one of their comrades. Even if Carter could be taken out from among them, the return journey would be full of danger.

But the deputy-sheriff had fully determined to make the effort, and nothing could induce him to change his mind.

"You may get me a warrant for Carter," said he. "Of course I would not think of using it in Texas or Louisiana; but when I get the man across the line it may be well to have it."

Lassiter procured the warrant, and bid his young friend a sad farewell, convinced that he would never see him again.

George set out alone on his sorrel horse, carrying some food in his saddlebags, and armed with his rifle and two derringers.

On the road he carefully prepared a story to tell when he should reach the rendezvous of the desperadoes. He had come from the northern part of Arkansas, where he had killed a man who was pursuing him to recover a stolen horse, and had been compelled to "light out for Texas."

He easily made his way to the Texas border, where he had no little difficulty in getting the location of Thieves' Hollow, as he did not think it advisable to ask for it under that name, and

the country was so scantily settled that there were few persons of whom inquiries could be made.

But a little judicious hinting led him on, until he got the right direction, and at last he rode boldly into the place of his destination.

It was a very small settlement, composed of only a few shanties, the most important of which was devoted to the sale of "forty-rod" whisky.

At this place the young man alighted, and was received by a number of men who were filled with bad liquor, curiosity and suspicion. Their character was apparent at a glance, and he could not have the least doubt that he had actually reached Thieves' Hollow.

He, too, was suspicious and reticent, until, by the hints he dropped about being a fugitive from justice, he had gained the confidence of the crowd.

Then he introduced himself as Bud Wilson, and told the story that he had prepared for that purpose. As he told it in a straightforward way, and was well acquainted with the region in which he had located his adventure, he was believed, and, as he put on the appearance of a reckless young chap, he was received into the fellowship of the desperadoes.

At the same time he gave them to understand that he was young in crime, and was not above being troubled by the remembrance of what he had done.

"The fact is, fellers," said he, "that I never killed a man afore. I reckon it's nothin' when you git used to it; but it tetches me on the raw, and I jest had to light out."

He was assured that he would soon recover from his unpleasant sensations, and that he might find a refuge at Thieves' Hollow, as long as he could pay his way. If his money gave out, he would have to find some means of getting more.

Having established himself with these wild companions, he looked for a man with a club-foot and a missing finger, and soon found him. He learned, too, that this man's name was Jack Carter, and then he believed that his dangerous mission was fully half performed.

He cultivated the acquaintance of Jack Carter, and soon became so intimate with him that they two justified the old saying, "As thick as two thieves."

He noticed that Carter had plenty of money, and that it was in gold. As the scamp spent his money pretty freely, George easily got a chance to examine one of the pieces, and discovered on it Reuben Draine's private mark.

The one thing then left to do was to capture his man and take him home.

He sought a private conversation with Jack Carter, and gave him an interesting bit of information.

"The story that I told when I came here, Jack," said he, "was as straight as a shingle; but there's a tail to it. I ain't quite so green as I made out to be, and I came down here to make a strike, as well as to git out of the way of the law. I knew of a rich cattle-trader who was comin' this way, with his pockets full of money. I've heard from him since, and he will be apt to cross the border to-morrer night. I've

been lookin' about for the right kind of a pardner, and you suit me to a notch. If you will go with me to strip the cattle-trader, we will make a big haul and keep it to ourselves."

This proposition was "nuts" to Jack Carter, who was getting short of money, and he accepted it joyfully.

The next afternoon they set out, taking the trail which George Denston had followed when he came to Thieves' Hollow.

At sunset, when they were several miles away from their comrades, and near the border, George proposed that they should conceal themselves in a thicket at the side of the trail, and await the arrival of their victim, who would be pretty sure to come along before midnight.

They had hitched their horses, and Jack Carter had seated himself on the ground to enjoy the contents of a flask of whisky, when his comrade suddenly confronted him with a leveled pistol.

"Throw up your hands!" ordered George.

Carter's rifle was too far away, and he reached for a pistol.

"Drop it," said George, "or you are a dead man. Throw up your hands, I tell you!"

Carter raised his hands; but, when George approached him, he jumped up with amazing agility, and grappled his antagonist.

There was a severe but short struggle, which ended in favor of the strong and active young deputy sheriff, who tied the hands of the desperado firmly behind his back.

"What sort of a joke is this, Bud Wilson?" asked Carter. "If you have brought me out here to rob me, just go through me and finish the job."

"My name is not Bud Wilson," replied George. "I am George Denston, a deputy sheriff from Arkansas, and I arrest you for the murder of Reuben Draine."

"Wide-awake George, by thunder!" exclaimed Carter. "I've heard of you, young chap. But you can't serve any warrant on me in Texas."

"I will have you over the border pretty quick," replied George, "and I warn you that you had better not try to get away."

Of course Carter, notwithstanding this warning, lost no chance of attempting to make his escape, and George Denston's existence until he reached home was one of constant wakefulness and watchfulness.

He disarmed his prisoner, mounted him on his own horse, and drove him on, riding all that night and all the next day, with scarcely a stoppage for a bite of food. The second night they spent in the woods, and the third night at the house of a farmer to whom George had confided his purpose on his way down. But at no time did he feel sufficiently secure to take the rest he needed.

When he reached home, and had put his prisoner into the sure hands of Abe Lassiter, he was completely exhausted. He slept, and it was long before the waking hour came.

Then he hastened to Mary Draine, who had already been informed of the result of his mission, and who was more than grateful to him for what he had done.

The upshot of this exploit was that the proof

brought against Jack Carter caused him to confess his crime, and Tom Draine was released.

Another upshot was an engagement of marriage between George Denston and Mary Draine, who was as pretty as she was amiable and true, and who came in for a nice bit of property that her miserly father had saved.

CHAPTER XVII.

RUNNING FOR OFFICE.

BEFORE the time came for George Denston and Mary Draine to be married, there was a general election, at which members of the State Legislature were to be chosen.

Wide-awake George was so popular in his own neighborhood, and had made such a broad reputation through the district for skill and bravery and good sense, that many of his friends, including Abe Lassiter, advised him to become a candidate for the Legislature.

As the farm was then well under way, and Ben was old enough and smart enough to take almost the entire management of it, George thought that he would lose nothing by making a bold stroke for a higher position, and announced himself as a candidate.

As it was a sort of a "scrub race," there were then three candidates in the field besides himself, the most important one being Ben Gerrish, a young lawyer who had been imported into the neighborhood by Colonel Welburn, and who was championed by that influential gentleman, who had a swamp land scheme that he wanted to push through the Legislature for his own benefit.

As George Denston had made a big name for himself by his pursuit and capture of Reuben Draine's murderer, he was recognized as a formidable candidate, and two of the others soon dropped out, leaving it to lawyer Gerrish and the young deputy sheriff.

George at once began an active canvass, going from house to house, and "log-rolling" in the usual way to solicit the votes and influence of his neighbors.

In the course of his canvass it was necessary to visit the "doggeries," as the liquor shops at the county town and the cross-roads were called, and in one of them he witnessed an exhibition of practical politics that was decidedly unpleasant.

A young man had expressed in George's presence an intention of voting for him, when one of Gerrish's supporters stepped up to the voter and threatened to "bu'st his head" if he did not abandon that intention.

"I think you had better not try it," said George, coming promptly to the rescue. "His vote is his own, and he has a right to cast it as he pleases, and I will see that he is protected in that right."

"How will you help yourself, you miserable whiffet, you sneakin' polecat, you interloper from Indiana?"

Of course such an insult must be resented at once, and George knocked the man down without a word.

This was the signal for an onslaught by the supporters of Gerrish and Welburn, who were largely in the majority in the "doggerly," and George and his few friends were getting the

worst of it, when a tall and powerful man suddenly stepped in and changed the scene.

This was Lon Brewer, who has been mentioned in these sketches, and who was not only friendly to George Denston, but entertained a yet warmer feeling for that young man's sister.

He pushed his way through the "muss," coming right and left with his heavy fists, clearing a passage for George, and dragged him out the door to where his horse was hitched.

"I don't want to run off and leave my friends," protested George.

"But you must. Your friends will be safe enough when you are gone. The truth is, George, that you have been making such a hole in Gerrish's vote that Col. Welburn has put some men on your track to jayhawk you. He is afraid that you will win the race unless he can get you killed off or laid up. So you must take care of yourself, and I am going to see you safe home right now."

The candidate mounted his horse, and suffered himself to be led away.

But he and Brewer did not go directly home, and his stoppages on the route gave his enemies another chance, of which they availed themselves.

As the two friends were traversing a forest road a dash upon them was made from a side path by several mounted men.

It was so unexpected and so sudden that George, for once, was entirely unprepared for it, and he was taken quite at a disadvantage.

But it happened that this was the very thing that Lon Brewer had been looking for.

As he saw the rush he brought down his whip with all his force upon the flank of the mare George was riding, startling that animal into such an exhibition of speed as must have astonished herself as well as her rider.

She dashed down the road at a headlong gallop, and was so thoroughly frightened that George was unable to regain control of her until she had gone about a quarter of a mile.

In the mean time he heard rapid firing behind him, and was nearly crazy to go to the assistance of his friend.

When he finally succeeded in pulling up the mare, he looked back, and saw Brewer riding toward him alone. But he was pale, and he leaned forward in his saddle.

"What was the matter?" eagerly asked George. "Why did you give my horses that cut?"

"It was those same jayhawkers," replied Brewer. "I sent your horse out of the muss because I didn't want old Welburn to win his game by driving you off the track. But you may bet your life, George, that I made them pay for their fun."

"I heard the shots. Are you hurt, Lon?"

"Well they hit me once or twice, and I believe they have kinder sickened me."

As Brewer swayed in his saddle, George helped him to alight, and found that he had been struck in two places. He bound up the wounds as well as he could, so as to stop the loss of blood, helped his friend to mount, and took him to the Denston homestead, which fortunately happened to be near at hand.

The story of this encounter moved Mrs. Den-

ton to deplore her son's entrance into politics, and to beg him to withdraw from the race before he got killed; but Lucy's sympathies at once went out to the wounded man, whom her brother could not praise too highly.

She posted Ben off for a doctor, and com-Brewer to remain where he was and to be nursed by her mother and herself until his wounds were entirely healed.

The upshot of this adventure was a marriage engagement between Lon Brewer and Lucy Denston, with which George was highly pleased.

"You have got a prize, Lucy," said he. "Lon is a man all through, and a better and truer man never trod the earth."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WINNING THE GAME.

THE Gerrish party, which was in reality the Welburn party, circulated their own account of the attack in the forest road, and tried to make capital against George Denston by accusing him of being a coward, who had run away and left his friend to bear the brunt of the "skrimmage."

But this falsehood was pretty well refuted by George's reputation for courage, and by the statements which Lon Brewer sent out from his sick room.

Still, though it was clear to those who had intelligence to look into the matter that Col. Welburn's swamp-land scheme was intended for the benefit of his private pocket, and did not lack much of being a swindle, he had succeeded in persuading many that it was an important public measure which would be of great value to the people of the district.

It was also quite certain that Col. Welburn, who was a wealthy man for that region, was spending money freely in the canvass, and that he would omit no effort to elect his candidate. There could be no doubt that these methods were telling against George Denston.

His youth was also alleged against the young man, and the fact that he was "only a farmer," while his opponent was a lawyer, who could speak for his constituents and exert an influence in their behalf.

These unfavorable indications were increased by the effort of the Gerrish men to bring about a joint discussion between their candidate and his young opponent. They made a proposition to this effect, but George's friends refused to accept it. They knew that their candidate was a young fellow, one of themselves, who had never attempted to speak in public, and believed that it would be the height of unfairness to pit him against a trained speaker and practiced debater.

The other side were not slow to say that Denston was afraid to meet Gerrish, and that cause always passes for a weak one which does not find a bold defender.

Thus it was that George Denston was running behind the expectations of his friends and his own wishes, and was losing votes daily, until he began to grow despondent.

At last, shortly before the canvass closed, he went to Abe Lassiter, the chairman of the committee on his side, and asked him to make an

immediate arrangement with Gerrish for a joint discussion.

Lassiter, who saw nothing but disaster in such a course, tried to argue him out of it; but George, with a smiling face, insisted on the point.

"But you can't make a speech, George," said his friend. "That fellow will chew you up and talk you out of your boots."

"Maybe he won't. Give me a chance, Abe, and I think I will win this fight."

"What has got into you, my boy? Have you found out anything about Gerrish, or Welburn, or any of them?"

"Well, I have heard a story."

"A story! That is just the thing, if it is a good story, and if you can tell it well. What is it, George?"

"I don't care to tell it just yet. Fix the thing up and give me a chance."

The arrangement was made, and the announcement of the joint discussion was circulated broadcast, the Gerrish faction boasting that they had the young fellow at last just where they wanted him.

On the appointed day there was a large crowd, for a thinly-settled country, at the place of meeting. The entire section had taken a holiday, and the people had come from far and near to see the young farmer 'chawed up' by the lawyer from Kentucky.

Lawyer Gerrish, who had the opening, made a fine, flowery and argumentative speech. As his friends said, he was "cocked and primed" for the occasion, and he did not propose to "leave a grease-spot" of his young opponent. The audience listened to him attentively, and applauded him frequently. At the close of his speech he confidently predicted his election, and alluded compassionately to his "young friend," who had been led to make a losing race by bad advisers and the vanity of youth.

George Denston rose to reply, greeted only by the forced applause of his friends. But he had a confident air and a smiling face.

"My neighbors and friends," he said, "it is true that I am young; but you have the consolation of knowing that I am not old in iniquity. It is also true that I have not been long in the county; but I came here earlier than my opponent, and you will bear me out in saying that I have done more for the district, so far, than he has done."

"It has lately been hinted that I have played the part of a coward; but I need only appeal to those who know me to nail that lie. As for the swamp-land scheme, I can only say, without imputing any bad motives to Colonel Welburn, that I believe it to be a swindle on the State, intended to benefit a few persons at the expense of the people generally, and I am sure that all who look into the matter and think for themselves will agree with me."

"The gentleman who has just addressed you is a lawyer, and I am not; but I am sure you know that I believe in doing justice, and I have proved to you that I am in favor of punishing the guilty, rather than allowing the innocent to suffer." (This sentence brought a big round of applause.)

"I have never made a speech, and shall not

attempt to do so now, as I am sure that I would make a failure. Instead of that I will tell you a little story.

"A few days ago, when I was canvassing for votes in a quiet way, I called on a neighbor of mine, who is known all over the district as a good, sensible, friendly and honest man—Uncle Jimmy Truesdell.

"I knew that Uncle Jimmy was opposed to me for several reasons; because he is a Whig, while I am a Democrat; because he had let himself be half-persuaded to favor the swamp-land scheme; and because he thought me a little too young to go to the Legislature. I had no idea of getting his vote, and did not ask him for it.

"But I had not been in the house ten minutes when he told me that he was going to vote for me.

"I was greatly surprised, and was curious to know the reason for his change of mind.

"I will tell you just how it was, George," said Uncle Jimmy. "Last night the other man came here, and I was mighty glad to see him, as I had made up my mind to vote for him. It was late, and I asked him to stay all night. You know I've got only one sleeping-room with two beds in it, and the old woman and I sleep in one of them. So I gave Lawyer Gerrish a hint to step out while we went to bed, and when we were fixed I called to him to come in.

"He seemed to be a long time about going to bed, and I peeped out, and there he was on his knees. There's a good and Christian man,

thinks I, and I'll be powerful glad to vote for him. I whispered to the old woman, and she peeped out, and was powerful pleased, too. But she looked out again, and she made me look, and what do you think I saw?

"Why, George, that chap wasn't praying a bit. He had pulled off his b'iled shirt, and he had pulled out of his saddle-bags a long thing like a woman's nightgown, with ruffles on it, too; and he put that thing on his back, and popped into bed.

"Now, George," said Uncle Jimmy, "you don't ever ketch me giving my vote to a man who wears a woman's nightgown, with ruffles on it, at that!"

George Denston sat down as soon as he had finished his story, and the applause and laughter that followed were something terrific.

Lawyer Gerrish rose to reply; but he was at a loss for the right thing to say, and it would have been hard to say anything in the face of the storm of hisses and laughter that greeted him.

The election was held the next day, and George Denston was returned by a good majority.

The district had cause to regard him as an able and faithful representative, and when the session was ended he came home and nearly cleared his mother's farm of debt.

Then he married Mary Draine, and settled on the Draine farm, while Lon Brewer married Lucy Denston, and helped Ben to take care of the Denston place.

THE END.

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